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# BROWNING'S WORLD OF NATURE AND SPIRIT:
# ANIMAL AND PLANT IMAGERY
# FROM SORDELLO TO THE RING AND THE BOOK

by

© SHAUNA MARGARET MURRAY

A THESIS
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled BROWNING'S WORLD OF NATURE AND SPIRIT: ANIMAL AND PLANT IMAGERY FROM "SORDELLO" TO "THE RING AND THE BOOK" submitted by Shauna Margaret Murray in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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# ABSTRACT

Previous critics have examined in single poems particular animal and plant images to show their significance, or have compiled lists of animals used for characterization in major poems. But the continual presence of a multitude of animal and plant images in Browning's poetry has never been fully explored or accounted for. I argue that Browning operates from the particular, the world of matter, to the universal, the world of spirit, and that the hidden, unconscious areas of man are to be included in the meaning of "spirit." Browning seeks to reveal the souls of his personae through the minutiae of the organic life existing as a counterpoint to the more conscious revelations of his characters. This underworld of animals and plants, however perverse and irrational at times, is ultimately a force for life, although it may also create a landscape indicating sterility and the absence of life.

The Introduction and Chapter I "define" Browning's theory of imagery--his emphasis on the concrete, the natural, and the external world of nature as sources for his symbols and images. Those parts of *Sordello* are analyzed which probe the relationship between the poet and his medium, language. Chapter II, concentrating on the poems from *Dramatic Lyrics*, *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, *Men and Women*, and *Dramatis Personae*, is largely a chapter of "process" in which the argument is built up inductively. Representative key images and image clusters are traced in the poems of this middle period. Through close readings of monologues and lyrics which may be quite diverse in

their overt themes, I show that there are overlapping patterns of natural imagery which unite them. These patterns culminate in the dream-nightmare poem, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." In Chapter III this poem is examined in terms of its negative, unnatural imagery, and then explored through the device of Freudian dream-analysis which the poem's conception and form make appropriate. "Childe Roland" is the link between the individual poems written after Sordello with their multitudinous imagery, and the major long poem of Browning's life, The Ring and the Book. This tale of crime and violence fuses the individual image patterns established previously, particularly as they reveal the darker side of man's soul.

It becomes increasingly apparent throughout this study that philosophical and psychological significance exists in and grows out of the imagery. For the natural imagery not only illuminates the characters of the *dramatis personae*, but on a deeper level it creates an underlying pattern which reveals Browning's understanding of the world of man, nature, and spirit.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# INTRODUCTION

## BROWNING: "RECORDING CHIEF-INQUISITOR"

> I only knew one poet in my life:
> And this, or something like it, was his way.
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> He took such cognizance of men and things,
> If any beat a horse, you felt he saw;
> If any cursed a woman, he took note;
> Yet stared at nobody,--you stared at him,
> And found, less to your pleasure than surprise,
> He seemed to know you and expect as much.
> So, next time that a neighbour's tongue was loosed,
> It marked the shameful and notorious fact,
> We had among us, not so much a spy,
> As a recording chief-inquisitor,
> The town's true master if the town but knew! (1-2, 30-40)
>
> --"How It Strikes a Contemporary"[1]

It is Browning as "recording chief-inquisitor" or God's "spy" who wrote the body of poetry to be examined in this study. Henry James entitled his short story apparently based on Browning, "The Private Face," and it is the private side of the poet which perceived, examined, and contemplated all that came within his scope, and sought out new material constantly. The kind of imagery he uses, and the role that imagery plays in poetry from Sordello through The Ring and the Book bear out that he saw with exquisite exactness the multifariousness of life in the worlds of man and nature, and that he took what he saw in nature to reflect upon the psychology of man and--ultimately--upon God.

What kind of imagery is dominant in Browning's poetry? The only study to date which concentrates exclusively on this aspect of the poet's art has been C. Willard Smith's Browning's Star-Imagery: The Study of a Detail in Poetic Design. As the title indicates, a reading of the poetry is made through the recurring star imagery and its variations. But what other images besides the star recur so frequently, though not with predetermined meanings, as to form a meaningful pattern? William Whitla affirms that the Incarnation is the central symbol and the "Central Truth" of Browning's poetry. Barbara Melchiori concentrates on the imagery of gold in one chapter of The Poetry of Reticence. In Browning's Characters, Park Honan parallels the development of imagery with the development of character and form; Altick and Loucks in Browning's Roman Murder Story compile all the imagery used for characterization in The Ring and the Book, and devote a chapter to the use of metaphor in that poem.

The kind of imagery I wish to examine represents a breaking down of the pure white light (the stars and the moon, perhaps) into its component colours; it also represents a concentration on the concrete embodiment of the infinite in the finite, with the emphasis on the moment in this world. I believe that the great predominance of animal and plant imagery in Browning's poetry (noted from time to time but never fully examined)[2] is significant in each individual instance and in a broader psychological pattern commenting on the lives of men and women within the poems. Thus it is upon imagery from nature, from the animal and plant worlds, that this study will concentrate. The purpose is not merely to catalogue such images, or even to define their pure aesthetic function (although I will begin from that position). Rather, I want to show that Browning operates from the particular, the world of matter, to the universal, the world of spirit. Within the world of spirit I include the psychological exploration of the dark side of human nature as well as the enlightened moments when matter and spirit, time and infinity fuse in aesthetic and human equivalents to the religious Incarnation.

C. Willard Smith writes of Browning's imagery in general:

> Poetic imagery is one of the most characteristic elements of Robert Browning's art. But rarely, if ever, does Browning employ this descriptive power to adorn his poetry with purely ornamental detail; he prefers to use it as one of his effective means of expression. The poetic image was for him the oblique way of telling truth, of doing the thing that shall breed the thought.[3]

Imagery is the language of perception, of the senses, and is more than the clothing of thought, certainly more than "ornamental detail" for Browning. The image, even if used to give flesh and body to a thought or feeling, immediately acquires a new meaning at a new level, and will not always allow itself to become equated with a thought. However, it is also risky to isolate imagery from thought in the sense that one seeks the total meaning of a poem in its imagery, a meaning which might fail to take into account the readings provided by all other levels of the poem's form and content.[4]

Browning creates a drama of metaphor which I feel is most active when built around a particular category, natural, and a particular type of imagery, sensual and concrete. Imagery is only one aspect of Browning's rhetoric, and because of the dramatic nature of the poems examined, the context of each image is essential; the dialectic of the speaker grows increasingly important in the mature poems of Men and Women, Dramatis Personae, and in The Ring and the Book. It is necessary to take into account Browning's general themes, philosophy, psychological approach to character, as these are inseparable from imagery.

Beyond the context of the particular poem, the poet's conscious presentation of extremely illogical, even neurotic points of view and

5

personal crises leads one to examine the unconscious meanings of the imagery, not only in terms of the single speaker, but in a broader pattern which links diverse characters, which approaches the whole as made up of parts, and which attempts to discover the multiple relationships experienced by Browning to constitute his vision of the world. There is a distinction to be made: Browning understood the art of rhetoric and the possibilities of drama, both inner and outer. However, within the rhetorical considerations are the multiple possibilities of revelation in the recurrent images from nature. What is revealed is the unconscious; Browning's message is to a large extent about the unconscious.

From the time of the Browning Societies until quite recently, Robert Browning has been viewed either as a poet to be read primarily for his "message" and his theology (defined in terms of nineteenth-century conventional Christianity), or as a poet to be avoided for reasons of his muddled, muddy thinking and obscure verse. A classic, and influential, critique of the second class is F.R. Leavis' dismissal of Browning, with the other Victorian poets, as at best a weak harbinger of modern poetic techniques. Browning, not a poet of withdrawal, does belong "to the world he lives in," admits Leavis. "But," he continues,"is this altogether by reason of qualities that should recommend a poet? There are kinds of strength a poet is best without. And it is too plain that Browning would have been less robust if he had been more sensitive and intelligent."[5]

Leavis' fuller account of Browning's failures aligns itself closely with the criticism of the poet put forth by George Santayana in

"The Poetry of Barbarism" (which also includes Whitman in its indictment). Santayana writes,

> . . .one may notice in Browning many superficial signs of the deepest of all failures, the failure in rationality and the indifference to perfection. Such a sign is the turgid style, weighty without nobility, pointed without naturalness or precision. Another sign is the "realism" of the personages, who, quite like men and women in actual life, are always displaying traits of character and never attaining character as a whole.[6]

When Matthew Arnold had complained to Clough of the "multitudinousness" of Browning's poetry, it was a similar lack of wholeness or perfection to which he referred.[7] Browning is also accused by Santayana of putting his own boastful exaltation of lust and passion into the mouths of his personae with an almost "muscular Christianity."[8] "There is a serious danger," according to the philsopher, "that a mind gathering from his pages the raw materials of truth, the unthreshed harvest of reality, may take him for a philosopher, for a rationalizer of what he describes. Awakening may be mistaken for enlightenment, and the galvanizing of torpid sensations and impulses for wisdom."[9]

Santayana's criticism, in its day representing the swing of the pendulum to the other extreme from the adulation of the Browning Societies, contains some measure of truth. Browning does align himself implicitly with the "barbarians," does deal with "raw materials," with the elemental human passions, with the physical symbolism of Christianity. However, this does not mean poetic failure, nor imperfection in the sense Santayana implies. His most telling charge of "indifference to perfection" could be answered on one level by Browning's theory of the imperfect which he held as well as Ruskin. For now, it is only necessary to say that the qualities which Santayana uses to condemn

Browning will reveal themselves as reasons to approve his work.

William James, who like his brother was also interested in Browning, felt there was no question: "Give me Walt Whitman and Browning ten times over. . . . The barbarians are in the line of mental growth, and those who insist that the ideal and the real are dynamically continuous are those by whom the world is to be saved."[10] G.R. Elliott claims that Browning should be given credit as a "grandfather of our 'New Poetry,'" for, like Whitman, he believed that the soul could be approached through the body, and he had an interest in "thoughts that break through language and escape."[11] F.R. Leavis' conclusion is less favourable. Browning's "use, if it had been finer, of spoken idiom in verse might have been worth a great deal to later poets: at the end of the century Mr. Pound found it worth study. But so inferior a mind and spirit as Browning's could not provide the impulse needed to bring back into poetry the adult intelligence."[12] When we examine Browning's aesthetic theory, particularly with regard to his use of language, Pound himself will aid in refuting the harshness of Leavis' charges.

W. David Shaw fears that the "New Critics" with their emphasis on psychology and style rather than upon ideas would have alarmed Browning more than the Browning Society with its stress on the doctrine and philosophy of the poet.[13] Surely there is a third phase of criticism in effect, one which balances form and content as Matthew Arnold prescribed.[14] Indeed, imagery and the psychological reading of imagery can only give a fuller vision of Browning's total philosophy and world view.

Imagery is a broad term for figurative language of all types--

whether metaphor, simile or symbol. As the discussion progresses, I will concentrate on the two categories of imagery, animal and plant, rather than on specific techniques and types of image-making. I will examine the content of the imagery, its recurring or variant patterns, as it offers revelations of a psychological nature. For the imagery functions as an expression of the unconscious of the particular speaker. Kenneth Burke's distinction between symbol interpreted in an "essentializing" way, and symbol used "proportionally," allowing for free-associations to determine the complex meanings, is a useful one to mention at the outset.[15] For the purpose of using Freudian methods of analysis to interpret poetry, says Burke, the "important matter . . . is to suggest that the examination of a poetic work's internal organization would bring us nearer to a variant of the typically Freudian free-association method than to the purely symbolic method toward which he subsequently gravitated."[16] Freudian methods of interpretation, applying psychoanalysis to poetry, (as I will do with "Childe Roland"), can be practiced if they in turn are seen only as one valid form of interpretation. With free-association, one does not concentrate on the essential, to the exclusion of all concomitant meanings. The image, rather than having one fixed symbolic meaning, may have multiple meanings. These give layers of rich patternings to the poems. Although, as Burke suggests, a house may be nothing more than a house, in a poem it would then be a very flimsy structure to keep out the wind and the rain.[17]

The images belong to the personae who utter them, who experience all in an instant, yet who progress only if they receive insight from the moment's experience. As Arthur Symons explains, "it is Browning's frequent practice to reveal the soul to itself by the application of a sudden test, which shall condense the long trial of years into a single moment, and so 'flash the truth out by one blow.'"[18] He quotes here from Pater's The Renaissance. Pater, speaking of the spiritual crisis of a Browning character, writes: "To realise this situation, to define, in a chill and empty atmosphere, the focus where rays, in themselves pale and impotent, unite and begin to burn, the artist may have, indeed, to employ the most cunning detail, to complicate and refine upon thought and passion a thousand-fold. . . . Yet, in spite of this intricacy, the poem has the clear ring of a central motive. We receive from it the impression of one imaginative tone, of a single creative act."[19] Pater's image of rays which "unite and begin to burn" is not unlike the recurrent image in Browning's poetry and letters of white light broken down into its components, "prismatic hues," or the reverse image, of the colours of the spectrum fusing, ideally, to form the "pure white light."[20]

But if, in one sense, it is true as Pater states that each poem creates this sense of wholeness, this essence of character, one should remember that in terms of Browning's "theory of the imperfect" it is a rare moment when the pure white light truly comes into focus. There are two levels of imperfection, not to be confused--those poems which, because of a poetic failure, do not establish a unity as they set out to do, or are perhaps too shallow and one-dimensional to really matter; and, of concern to this discussion, those characters almost perfectly conceived like the Bishop who orders his tomb, in themselves fragmented beings, their potential imperfectly realized, their earthbound desires continually frustrated. These frustrated individuals may be found in poems involving aesthetics, love, or religion. The exceptional personae, such as the lover in "By the Fire-side," who move from the "good moment" to something richer and more enduring stand out in relief when they do occur. When the moment is made infinite the poems are in themselves beautiful fusions of image and thought--but no more so than the successful poems about imperfection.

To examine many poems and many personae as nearly simultaneously as possible, is another way of fusing the colours of the spectrum into a whole. Browning, I argue, achieved this fusion himself, in *The Ring and the Book*. In the first three chapters of this study I want to examine patterns of imagery recurring in poems with sometimes quite diverse contexts. I hope to show that the imagery which grows increasingly complex, and which is integrated with all the other qualities of the poems in Browning's maturing poetry, is then more fully fused into a pattern and statement in the major long poem of Browning's life. The earlier parts of the study will entail some full readings of individual poems, especially of those which do "flash the truth out by one blow" by means of multiple carefully constructed details of language and imagery. Such images are the pale rays which are strong in their total sum, thus shedding light even, paradoxically, as in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," on the very darkness of the human soul.

# CHAPTER I

## THE NATURAL OBJECT AS ADEQUATE SYMBOL

> Ha! sir, I have seen you sniffling and snoozling
> about among my flowers.
> And what, pray, do you know about horticulture, you
> capriped?
>
> —Ezra Pound, "The Faun"

### A: Introduction

We might ask the question posed in the epigraph of both Pound and Browning themselves. In his search for sensory imagery to embody the ideas and personalities of his *personae* Browning presumed to "know" plants, flowers, and petals, indeed all creeping and crawling things of Creation. And Pound stated consciously in his poetry and criticism that the natural object becomes identifiable, when chosen with precision, with what it symbolizes. Both poets use natural imagery to bring order and design to the chaos of existence, yet the underlying meaning of the imagery seems to delineate the disorderly content of reality, particularly the reality of man's and society's inner existence.

Every poet uses imagery. Browning's use of imagery is not a total innovation, when he is placed beside such obvious fellow image-makers as Shakespeare, Donne, and Keats. In the Victorian era, however, when Tennyson, Browning and Arnold were all expressing the new tensions and divisions of their age, I feel that it was Browning who went furthest afield, and into the future, to forge a new language, especially its imagery, the more strikingly and aptly to express his world. He also, of course, created a new dramatic form for poetry, a form which needed the Victorian period (as the Victorians needed it) to fully find itself. Browning contributed to the line of poets from Pound through Robert Lowell, as they consciously acknowledge. Also, with Hardy, he was the most obvious nineteenth-century forbear of T. S. Eliot. This debt was more difficult to recognize for Eliot who was seeking to leap back in time over the Victorian period. Since it was Pound who so often gave voice to the influence of Browning's poetry upon his, I will review some of his definitions, as well as the Imagist manifestoes, to clarify the quality of Browning's imagery, and to define his aesthetic theory. The second section of this chapter will examine Sordello's struggle, in part of that seminal poem, to devise a poetic theory which takes into account the poet's only medium, language. Finally, I will give a reading through the natural imagery, of two art monologues from _Men and Women_: one, with a _persona_ who points to this world as starting place for the material of art and life, and for the transcendent; the other with a _persona_ who fails to make this discovery, even while he yearns for the infinite.

There are key aspects of Pound's poetic theories--and his relation to the Imagist movement--which should be briefly examined. Pound, in his own poetry and criticism, comments most acutely on Browning's art. We might start with Pound's defence of _Sordello_ against its critics, in which he singles out most specifically Browning's use of language:

> It will be seen that the author is telling you something, not merely making a noise, he does not gum up the sound. The "beauty" is not applied ornament, but makes the mental image more definite. The author is not hunting about for large high-sounding words, there is a very great variety in the rhyme but the reader runs on unaware.[1]

This passage could stand as an epigraph to the discussion on *Sordello* to follow, but more than this it is a general statement on Browning's use of imagery in his poetic development from *Sordello* on. Simplicity, clarity, and integrity are the qualities which the Imagists sought, and which Pound found in at least some of Browning's work. Imagism has been described as "a fresh perception of the relation of language to meaning,"[2] a description appropriate to Browning's use of imagery.

Pound, in 1914, quoting his own definition, made the following comments on the image:

> The Image is the poet's pigment. The image has been defined as "that which represents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." The painter should use his colour because he sees it or feels it. . . . It is the same in writing poems, the author must use his *image* because he sees it or feels it, *not* because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics.[3]

The image is very sensual, then, and is based largely on seeing and feeling (both in its inception and its realization). Feeling here is used to mean emotion, not the sense of touch, but both meanings apply in spirit. The poet must think imagistically; in the purest sense of Imagism the image *is* the poem, not an extraneous ornament subordinate to the argument.

Pound's definition of the image as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" might define Browning's concept of the "infinite moment," a moment which, even if it implies transcendence, demands concrete realization in life and art, and must initially stem from sense experience. Also, Pater's image for Browning's art cited in the Introduction, and Pound's definition of the Vortex as the "point of maximum energy"[4] are further variations on the theme (dominant, of course, in variant forms among the Romantics) of intensity breeding infinity in an instant of time, in an image. And here is C.Day Lewis' impression of metaphor as blending object and sensation in a unique fashion:

> The poet's re-creation includes both the object and the sensations connecting him with the object, both the facts and the tone of an experience: it is when object and sensation, happily married by him, breed an image in which both their likenesses appear, that something "comes to us with an effect of revelation."[5]

The pure image comes as a revelation to Pound, also. For him, mind and feeling must work together, concentrating directly on the thing itself.[6] "The symbol, naked and unexplained," says Graham Hough, "trailing no clouds of glory, becomes the image."[7] Yet certainly in Browning's poetry one must not expect total succinctness: there are multiple associations in the poem itself which attach themselves to the image, and eventually one sees image-associations crossing over from poem to poem.

The other attribute of Imagism, from Pound's perspective, which is of the essence in Browning's poetry is the kind (or category) of imagery which proves most appropriate for its new role, the area of life from which images and symbols should be drawn. Here, two statements of Pound summarize this question and support our choice of categories in Browning's work:

> Don't use such an expression as "dim lands of peace." It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol.[8]

> I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use "symbols" he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk.[9]

It seems evident that Browning's own description of the objective poet in his Essay on Shelley (1852) contains assumptions not unlike Pound's.

Ideally, the objective poet must develop to unite his function of fashioner with the subjective poet's function of seer. However, his original role of fashioner (and then of "Maker-see" as in Sordello)is essential in itself. According to Browning, an objective poet is

> . . . one whose endeavour has been to reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain) with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction. It has been obtained through the poet's double faculty of seeing external objects more clearly, widely, and deeply, than is possible to the average mind, and at the same time he is so acquainted and in sympathy with its narrower comprehension as to be careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an intelligible whole.[10]

The natural object, which would include objects from organic nature, the world of plants and animals, was for the objective poet, then, the "adequate symbol."

Pound's, and Browning's own, aesthetic manifestoes help to indicate the reason for focussing on animal and plant imagery in this study. That the choice is by no means an arbitrary one will become evident as Browning's poetic canon is examined from Sordello to The Ring and the Book. The particular themes to be studied are best expressed and contained in sensual imagery from nature and from all sides of nature including the "under-side."

Pound, as Leavis grudgingly admits, sees Browning as the stepping stone to the metaphysicals, and as the father of modern poetry, to a great extent.[11] However, to claim that Browning was an Imagist born in an earlier age, or that he anticipated "stream-of-consciousness" in Sordello, for example, would invite being charged with the "heresy" of modernism. Part of Browning's difficulty for the British Public, "ye who like me not," it is fair to say, was that he anticipated the malleability of language which was to be seen, in its flux and process, in Pound and Joyce particularly. Although Browning never wrote the one-image poem of the Imagists, in its purest, barest, sense, he could make the image contain the essence of the poem, as a "moment of revealed truth."[12] When we examine poetry being written nearly twenty years after Browning's death--and later--we see the Victorian poet's advancement in his own age, and his influence on the aesthetics and thought of ours.

In 1855 Browning published a poem in Men and Women which might stand as an example of his own poetic theories put into practice. In it he uses successfully a central extended image to epitomize these theories. John Keats is the ostensible subject of "Popularity." He, himself a poet who found expression in particular sensual images and symbols, is epitomized by the colour blue, in the following dazzling and splendid metaphor:

> Yet there's the dye, in that rough mesh,
>   The sea has only just o'erwhispered!
> Live whelks, each lip's beard dripping fresh,
>   As if they still the water's lisp heard
> Through foam the rock-weeds thresh.
>
> Enough to furnish Solomon
>   Such hangings for his cedar-house,
> That, when gold-robed he took the throne
>   In that abyss of blue, the Spouse
> Might swear his presence shone
>
> Most like the centre-spike of gold
>   Which burns deep in the blue-bell's womb,
> What time, with ardours manifold,
>   The bee goes singing to her groom
> Drunken and overbold. (36-50)

This picture, which we shall analyze in a moment, is itself part of a metaphor extending for the length of the poem. The vivid dye which would colour the hangings in Solomon's temple such a pure and deep shade of blue is extracted from the rough shells of the sea whelk. As seen in its natural state, the "thing itself," the potential of this creature is not obvious to the unimaginative eye. Yet it is not the fisherman who draws the whelks up from the depths who benefits, but rather those who refine and market the dye. By analogy, Keats gave us the blue in its original form through his imagination, but it is the lesser poets, his imitators, who gain success with their paler blues:

> Hobbs hints blue,--straight he turtle eats:
>   Nobbs prints blue,--claret crowns his cup:
> Nokes outdares Stokes in azure feats,--
>   Both gorge. Who fished the murex up?
> What porridge had John Keats? (61-65)

The source of the blue is Keats; the vein of poetry he opens up is the raw material upon which others will feast. The poem itself ends in language and sound left deliberately raw, as the shellfish metaphor suggests.[13]

How does the central image of Solomon's throne succeed as an integral part of the poem with its broader metaphor? Browning's source is, in part, the first book of Kings: "the cedar within the house was carved in the form of gourds and open flowers," (I Kings, vi, 18) and also every part was "overlaid with gold." The flower and bee image, however, is Browning's own, and one of many variations on a recurring image in his poetry. The choice of the colour blue for Keats, and of the blue-bell, might have been suggested by Keats's sonnet beginning, "Blue! Tis the life of heaven," and continuing with this stanza:

> Blue! Gentle cousin of the forest-green
>   Married to green in all the sweetest flowers,--
> Forget-me-not,--the Blue bell,--and, that Queen
>   Of secrecy, the Violet . . . .[14]

If blue is in general symbolic of the romantic imagination (as it is in Wallace Stevens' "Man With the Blue Guitar"),[15] in the flower it is "attached" to a real object, a "natural symbol," to use Pound's term. It is an appropriate symbol,when combined either with its source (the sea mollusk) or the flower which describes its brilliance, both for the poetry of Keats abounding in sensual imagery, and for Browning's poetry, which extracts so much of its own imagery from the concrete object in nature. Neither poet would use the blue dye abstractly; both would start with the "raw material" referred to by Browning in his discussion of the objective poet:

> For it is with this world, as starting point and basis alike that we shall always concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned. The spiritual comprehension may be infinitely subtilized, but the raw material it operates upon must remain.[16]

In the explicitness of the bee-flower metaphor there are more literary and psychological connotations than those of the Bible and Keats. It is directly sexual: the bee comes with passionate boldness, "singing to her groom," the gold spike which "burns deep in the bluebell's womb."[17] In "Women and Roses" this same image appears in a more erotic context since the poem's subject is love; there the bee is masculine, the flower feminine.

An interesting and important sidelight on the meaning of blue in the poem is provided by Ruskin's discussion of "Nature's" own use of blue:

> . . . Nature is just as economical of her fine colours as I have told you to be of yours. You would think, by the way she paints, that her colours cost her something enormous: she will only give you a single pure touch, just where the petal turns into light; but down in the bell all is subdued. . . even in the showiest flower. What you thought was bright blue is, when you look close, only dusty grey, or green, or purple, or every colour in the world at once, only a single gleam or streak of pure blue in the centre of it.[18]

In "Popularity" Browning has illustrated what C.H. Herford calls "Joy in Light and Colour," a quality of all his poetry:

> Browning's colouring is thus strikingly expressive of the build of his mind. . . . It is the colouring of a realist in so far as it is always caught from life, and never fantastic or mythical. But it is chosen with an instinctive and peremptory bias of eye and imagination--the index of a mind impatient of indistinct confusions and placid harmony, a mind of intensity, decision, and conflict.[19]

It is ironic that both Ruskin and Chesterton singled out "Popularity" as a prime example of Browning's obscurity, filled with some examples of his multitudinous recondite knowledge, according to Chesterton, missing out in connectives and detail in the eyes of Ruskin. In his criticism of Men and Women in a letter only recently published, Ruskin sends Browning a line by line analysis and questioning of "Popularity," and summarizes his total impression of Browning's work as follows:

> There is a stuff and fancy in your work which assuredly is in no other living writer's and how far this purple of it must be within this terrible shell; and only to be fished for among threshing of foam & slippery rocks, I don't know. There are truths & depths in it, far beyond anything I have read except Shakespeare. . . "I understand you not, my Lord." [20]

The sea whelks with their pure blue extract turn out to be a microcosm of Browning's total world of sensual and psychological imagery, of the need to start with the raw material, the natural object, the thing itself, a theory to be expanded upon in the discussion of Sordello. Then, too, the blue-bell and bee are examples of the central imagery of plants and animals to be examined in the body of this study.

Like Keats, Browning makes his appeal to all of the five senses, to touch, taste, and smell, as well as to hearing and sight. We tend to think of the image, in its simplest definition, as a word picture, implying that sight is the primary sense employed.[21] And indeed, there are few images without some visual sense. Browning possessed that sense in good measure, seeing and feeling things with equal passion. In a letter to Elizabeth Barrett, he speaks of how one should "open one's eyes and see abroad," and continues,

> A critic somewhere mentioned that as my characteristic--were two other poets he names placed in novel circumstances . . in a great wood, for instance, Mr. Trench would begin opening books to see how woods were treated of . . the other man would set to write poetry forthwith, from his old stock of associations, on the new impulse--and R. B. would sit still and learn how to write after![22]

(This approach to life and poetry Browning later embodied in the poem "Transcendentalism.") Browning discerned that one of the faculties of the poet was to see "external objects more clearly, widely, and deeply, than is possible in the average mind."[23] This is of extreme importance in explaining Browning's image-making capacity. The artist, and certainly Browning in particular, sees, like the child, with above average intensity; in extreme cases, in what is called by psychologists eidetic imagery, the visual image will persist after the stimulus has gone, so that the perceiver would not have to rely on an after-image or on memory, but would see for a time the image itself.[24] It has also been shown, quite expectedly from our point of view, that highly concrete words are much more likely to evoke sensory images than abstract words are; such images are also more easily retained.[25] A visual and tactile poet such as Browning perceives acutely, retains vividly, and then translates the perceptions into concrete, highly sensual words--which in turn stimulate the reader.

All the senses are in fact aids to "seeing" the total picture. The infinite variety of concrete and physical detail in his poems indicates that Browning grasps the object through a total sense experience. J.K. Bonnell, in 1922, presented the theory that Browning was particularly the poet of touch: "The external world perceived by him is not solely a world of eye and ear, but a world . . . of nose and tongue--also of tactual nerves, a world of palpable forms, of touch."[26] He affirms that Browning has a muscle-and-nerve, or a motor-tactual type of imagination, in contrast to the primarily ear-and-eye type possessed by Tennyson. Browning is the "poet *par excellence* of the third dimension--the architect, sculptor, poet to the finger-tips."[27] On the significance of touch, more recent remarks of Marshall McLuhan are worthy of note: "I would suggest that 'touch' is not so much a separate sense as the very interplay of the senses,"[28] and (using a Browningesque image): "tactility includes all the senses as white light incorporates all colors."[29] The sense of touch is man's first developed sense, and most basic to our understanding of today's world. And, adds McLuhan, "Tactility is the world of the interval, not of the connection, and that is why it is antithetic to the visual world."[30] When the fractured syntax of *Sordello* and of the later poems is considered, McLuhan's statement seems most applicable.

The stress which Browning places upon the physical in general and the sense of touch in particular is summarized by Herford:

> The implicit realism of his eye and ear was fortified by acute tactual and muscular sensibilities. He makes us vividly aware of surface and texture, of space, solidity, shape. Matter for him is not the translucent, tenuous, half-spiritual substance of Shelley, but aggressively massive and opaque, tense with solidity.[31]

The stress on the "sculptor" in Browning reminds us of Ruskin and of the importance both artists placed on the "Gothic." In the section of his book entitled "Joy in Form," Herford speaks of Browning's "plasticity" and the form of his "joy":

> Browning's joy in abrupt and intricate form had then a definite root in his own nervous and muscular energy. . . . In this brilliant visual speech sharply cut angles and saliences, or rugged incrustations, and labyrinthine multiplicity, Browning's romantic hunger for the infinite had to find its expression; and it is clear that the bias implicit in speech imposed itself in some points upon the matter it conveyed. Abrupt demarcations cut off soul from body, and man from God. The infinite habitually presented itself to him as something, not transcending and comprehending the finite, but *beginning where the finite stopped*,--Eternity at the end of Time. . . . [32]

This passage reads almost as a précis of the problems to be encountered in *Sordello*, where, in Book the Sixth, appears this query:

> So much was plain then, proper in the past;
> To be complete for. Satisfy the whole
> Series of spheres--Eternity, his soul
> Needs must exceed, prove incomplete for, each
> Single sphere--Time. But does our knowledge reach
> No farther? (VI,550-555)

How will the poet develop the means to contain the infinite within time?

## B: "Sordello" and "The Imaged Thing"

In *Sordello*, Browning probes the relationship between the poet and his language. Although the poem as a whole is a complex re-creation of the Sordello story with Browning's variations,[33] I wish to extract those passages in which Sordello the poet is in the forefront, and in which one can see Browning struggling to express an aesthetic for the poetic process. If such passages are examined, it will be seen that *Sordello* is indeed a seminal work, both for its development of the theory about the function of language, and for its stress on the role of nature. If each of Browning's poems is one "prismatic hue" rather than the "pure white light," then his theory of poetry must be the sum of all the poems in the "spectrum." But if we look at Sordello, we can see the starting point for Browning's theories, and sometimes the immediate embodiment of these theories in concrete language. Sordello is a key experience and experiment leading to the poems of the middle period, which reach their climax in The Ring and the Book.

Sordello, as we know, attracted Pound's attention (as it had earlier attracted the praise of Swinburne and Rossetti). It is a passage from Sordello which Pound quotes as a representative example of "limpidity of narration" and "lucidity of sound."[34] In the poem Browning shows his awareness (although the persona deviates at times) of the world as a source of life and as the starting point for art--as Pound also discusses in his theories about Imagism and the "adequate symbol." One must begin with experience here on earth, with the finite, before comprehending infinity. In his dramatization of Sordello's struggles to contain the infinite, Browning comes to understand more clearly the process for his own art, the art which is to grow and develop so successfully. He works out, in his own terms, the relationships and relative significances of nature and self, concrete world and spirit.

In Books the First and Second, especially, Browning comes to grips in theme and language with the struggle of the artist to play his role and choose his poetic form. Many of the troubadour poet's innovations are in language and in the image-making function of words. Some of his failures are the result of the transience of language and new forms, the very difficulty of transferring perceptions into images through the medium of words which "will not stay in place." Sordello anticipates Eliot's "Burnt Norton," by embodying in poetry this poetic problem. Language is dynamic, not static, subject, like life, to imperfection and failure. On occasion, happily, occur those infinite moments when perfection is attained. As Roma King puts it: "Although man must forego the perfect knowledge, the complete vision, he can realize some saving portion of Infinity through his finite faculties. . . . The dynamic rather than the static, the state of becoming rather than of being, shapes the amorphous gestalt from which Browning viewed human experience."[35] Thomas Collins also emphasizes the fluidity of experience in his recent paper which contends that in Sordello (and then not again until the poetry after 1864) Browning is writing synthetist poetry in which the reader is forced to participate because of the poetry's complexity.[36]

In Book the First are defined the two classes of poet which Sordello, with his natural perception and genius, might become. One finds first the poets who worship beauty, who are the unconscious descriptive poets (I, 505-515). Unfortunately they sometimes become slaves to the external world, and are limited by what they adore. These poets cannot reach the heights of the alternative class, containing those poets who are conscious of self (I,523-530). Poets of this second type see everything within nature as an extension of their own souls. They are capable of combining the colours of the spectrum into the pure white light. But their flaw is egoism and self-worship; they acclaim the singer, not the song. One poet loves beauty to the point where he loses individuality; the other comes to believe that beauty only exists through him and his songs. Sordello indulges, at certain phases of his poetic life, in both forms of excess. At the same time he needs the virtues of both classes: first he must be immersed in what he sees and senses, then he must immerse himself in the world of men.[37] He is on the right path, provided he can devise an appropriate form:

> ". . . I may find a thorough vent
> For all myself, acquire an instrument
> For acting what these people act; my soul
> Hunting a body out may gain its whole
> Desire some day!" (I,833-837)

A poet works by "re-creating human life--breathing his own soul into inert forms in direct imitation of divine creation."[38] This is, of course, what links Incarnation, the giving flesh to the Word, with the poet's act, as Browning expresses it throughout his canon, notably in The Ring and the Book.

Sordello in Mantua is subject to the temptations of the second class of poets mentioned earlier. He may on the one hand fail to communicate his vision to the rest of humanity, or, on the other, he may be tempted to communicate on the Ideal, abstract level of reality only, ignoring human limitations:[39]

> . . . Or if yet worse befall,
> And a desire possess it to put all
> That nature forth, forcing our straitened sphere
> Contain it,--to display completely here
> The mastery another life should learn
> Thrusting in time eternity's concern,--
> So that Sordello . . . .
> Fool, who spied the mark
> Of leprosy upon him, violet-dark
> Already as he loiters? Born just now,
> With the new century, beside the flow
> And efflorescence out of barbarism . . . . (I,561-571)

The speaker interrupts himself to criticize his tendency to leap ahead and foretell that this is indeed the fault Sordello will fall prey to. But to thrust "in time eternity's concern" is in fact the poetic and philosophic problem Browning has been involved with since Pauline, and the central theme of Sordello.[40] It may be a temptation, but to strive to attain the impossible is also the inherent part of the poet's role. Browning recognizes this, and it appears as a theme in many forms. Perhaps the one most easily recalled is Andrea del Sarto's, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp / Or what's a heaven for." But the theme occurs at many levels and in more subtle ways throughout the canon. It is the excesses of this poetic class which Browning deplores.[41]

Putting it at its simplest, the poet must not forget his audience. He must be one of the true "Makers-see," with the gift of prophecy and the gift to communicate the prophecy; the two are interrelated. Sordello, then, could not be a poet of this more exalted class if he did not attempt to contain the "infinite within the finite." Browning used this phrase in a letter to Ruskin which was written in reply to criticism of his Men and Women for its lack of logic and sequence. He makes a plea for poetic license, then adds: "I know that I don't make out my conception by my language, all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite."[42] The words "conception" and "language" are key ones to the discussion of Browning's imagery. Let us examine the problem as it evolves through Book the Second of Sordello.

After Sordello's successful, and spontaneous, displacement of Eglamor from his position as "best troubadour of Boniface," the young poet is hard-pressed to analyze his success with the Goito "lay." He searches into the intricate relation between singer and song which were one to him at the moment of creation. He finds he can communicate his beautiful private fancies to his audience through the song. They listen to what they know not, because he finds words for, and links together by song, their own indistinct fancies (II, 163-169). Fra Lippo Lippi felt this to be the chief function of art—to show people what they had "seen" with closed eyes before.

"So much for Eglamor" dismisses Sordello's predecessor from his mind--for a time:

> My own month came;
> 'T was a sunrise of blossoming and May.
> Beneath a flowering laurel thicket lay
> Sordello; each new sprinkle of white stars
> That smell fainter of wine than Massic jars
> Dug up at Baiae, when the south wind shed
> The ripest, made him happier; filleted
> And robed the same, only a lute beside
> Lay on the turf. (II,296-304)

Sordello may be the poet who, if he could unite the best of all classes, the objective and subjective functions of poetry too, would compress the scattered light of the "starriest into one star," but he cannot hope to do so by ignoring the individual and imperfect facets of man and nature. C. Willard Smith judges Sordello harshly at this point, for he feels that in his present role-playing, the poet has turned from the pure, "cold stars of heaven" to the "intoxicating loveliness of the stars of earth."[43] Sordello has been seduced by earth's beauties. But surely such a seduction is not dangerous unless Sordello believes (as he does now) that the beauty comes from him. The earthly stars, the flowers of organic nature, are as central to the poet as the unattainable heavenly stars. The absolute can only be approached through the minute facets of this world. Sordello's real error is his hubris, his belief that Nature's beauty only exists in isolation within himself as her interpretor.

Sordello has need, then, to adhere to some of the precepts of Browning's objective poet, who reverts to the "raw material" of the world: "There may be no end of the poets who communicate to us what they see in an object with reference to their own individuality: what it was before they saw it, in reference to the aggregate human mind, will be as desirable to know as ever."[44] Santayana, however, objected to this "raw" unharvested material which for Fra Lippo Lippi "means intensely, and means good."

J. Hillis Miller explains Browning's early works in words which are apt for Sordello's particular dilemma: "Back and forth Browning vacillates between the desire to become some one concrete thing, and the desire to remain permanently uncommitted, and therefore the only material mirror of the infinite richness of God."[45] I feel that the vacillation may be viewed quite positively if one regards Sordello, in particular, as a poem about process. To become fixed to one star is to acknowledge one's finiteness; to try to mirror the multitudinous variety in nature is a step towards containing the infinite within the finite. This paradox links up with the theory of the imperfect held by Browning and Ruskin. Mary Rose Sullivan's commentary succinctly summarizes the dichotomy of the poet, while at the same time it seems to transform Miller's doubts about Browning into affirmation:

> Convinced, almost from the outset, that his destiny as a poet depended upon his solving the dilemma, upon his bridging the gap between the uniqueness and permanence of self and the plenitude and change of the universe, he set resolutely about the task of finding an artistic medium which would satisfy both demands: he would learn, on the one hand, how to be true to his own individual vision and, on the other, how to realize in his poetry all the values of the richly various material world.[46]

One of the forms which Browning found was the dramatic monologue; but his experimentation, successfully carried out, to adapt his only possible medium, language, within or as part of the form, was perhaps of greater importance in bridging the gap.

In the central passage from Book the Second, Sordello, having tried various compromises, and having allowed his art to be prostituted to some extent, imagines the voice in his audience demanding "somewhat better," "A pitch beyond this unreal pageantry / Of essences," a voice asking that he "present us with ourselves at least, / Not with portions of ourselves, mere loves and hates / Made flesh: wait not!" (II, 564-568). One detects here the later voice of Santayana directed against Browning! Sordello's response is--in part--Browning's also, and the following passage voices the theory embodied in Sordello as a whole:

> Awhile the poet waits
> However. The first trial was enough:
> He left imagining, to try the stuff
> That held the imaged thing, and let it writhe
> Never so fiercely, scarce allowed a tithe
> To reach the light--his Language. (II,568-573)

The Language is in effect the "imaged" and the imagined thing--both meanings are apt. The test for Sordello now is to transform the imagined idea into words.

Sordello, then, has reached the heart of the matter, the Language. How is his vision to be translated into symbols which will communicate with his audience? Perhaps words can be made more malleable, flexible, to contain more meaning than before. For they have been a prison around the perceptions, preventing them breaking through. The poet decides to rework Language in accordance with the "new speech." After it is rewrought, however, (through a process which is not revealed to us), Sordello finds that, in testing the result,

> Piece after piece that armour broke away,
> Because perceptions whole, like that he sought
> To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
> As language: thought may take perception's place
> But hardly co-exist in any case,
> Being its mere presentment--of the whole
> By parts, the simultaneous and the sole
> By the successive and the many. (II, 588-595)

His hope, in contrast, had been to thrust "in time eternity's concern," to put "the infinite within the finite," to recreate the pure white light by redress to the broken and fragmented hues of the spectrum. Instead, the fragmented experience has not found expression in the linear time of words.

Sordello's poetic failure at this point is the other side of his human failure. He has not come to terms with either his role as man or his role as poet. The alliance of language and perception is thus forced, and the armor of words breaks away to reveal less than the whole. The use of the words "clothe" and "co-exist" suggests that Sordello thinks of words either as external garments adorning the perception, or that he imagines a one-to-one correspondence of word to perception. Language is called a "work of thought" which is at first confusing, unless by thought is meant a logical process of the mind, in contrast to the "simultaneous" nature of the process of perceiving. The dichotomy which seems to exist between the two processes, however, indicates one of the reasons for the failure. In Browning's own poetic development, as revealed in Sordello, he is gradually working out the integration of imagination and reason. Images can be seen as examples of language which combine idea and word, so that thought and perception have crossed boundaries.

Words, however, continue to challenge any poet, as Eliot's lines from "Burnt Norton" indicate:

> Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
> Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
> Always assail them.

The armor breaks away; the words crack and break. There is a subtle difference, however, between Eliot and Browning, and Sordello. For the former two, words are limited in themselves and therefore crack under the strain of the idea which they try to contain; for Sordello, the language is still understood as ornament which separates from the idea. But both figures of speech illustrate the paradox of a timeless moment being contained in a moment of time, the word; the problem of the whole having to be broken into parts before it can be communicated. Sordello wants either the total unity, or an easy kind of verse-making. The solution rests in an imperfection which is hard-won and whose individual fragments lead towards a perfection and timelessness which are the sum of their parts.

While Sordello intimates that he has failed, for the present, in his struggle to make language dynamic, what he strives to do is what Browning himself attempts from this poem onward. Part of the difficulty lies in the reader's understanding and it is significant that charges of obscurity bombarded the poet and destroyed his reputation for a time after the publication of Sordello in 1840. Is Sordello's failure different from that with which Browning was charged? There is a distinction between the poet and the persona here as throughout the poem. But much of Browning's defence in a letter to

Ruskin about the aim of his art applies to Sordello's own aims. And Browning did succeed in large part, where his persona failed for personal reasons, to unite the many facets of Sordello into the whole man.

Ruskin ended a letter to Browning in which he weighed the merits of Men and Women (see above, page 18) with the following critical metaphor: "You are worse than the worst Alpine Glacier I ever crossed. Bright, & deep enough truly, but so full of Clefts that half the journey has to be done with ladder & hatchet."[47] And here is Browning's reply, standing as a statement of his conception of communication between reader and poet, and of the nature of language:

> You would have me paint it all plain out, which can't be; but by various artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which succeed if they bear the conception from me to you. You ought, I think, to keep pace with the thought tripping from ledge to ledge of my "glaciers," as you call them; not stand poking your alpenstock into the holes, and demonstrating that no foot could have stood there;--suppose it sprang over there? In prose you may criticize so--because that is the absolute representation of portions of truth, what chronicling is to history--but in asking for more ultimates you must accept less mediates. . . .[48]

McLuhan, in describing tactility, also points to a non-linear mode of communication, to a simultaneity of experiences, to accepting fewer mediates, in fact.[49] As Pound was to do, Browning placed emphasis on the "swift grammar of sense rather than the slow grammar of logical development."[50] T.E. Hulme tried to formulate for the Imagists the means to achieve, in words, the simultaneity of thoughts uniting to form an image in the mind.[51] Langbaum, too, draws a lengthy parallel between Browning and Hopkins, saying that "both poets are obscure because they are trying to use words in such a way as to overcome the analytic effect of language."[52] Referring to the crucial lines 588 to 595, he continues:

> . . . for Sordello, thought and language are the things perception has been rent into. They are the diffusion and destruction of perception; and it is the point of poetic language to give the sense of itself. Both Browning and Hopkins break up a conventional syntax and multiply associations with bewildering rapidity, in order to make us feel that the things language has laid out in space and time and in order of succession are really happening simultaneously--in order to restore the instantaneous, orchestrated quality of the original perception. Both poets are working for an effect characteristic of symbolism and the mythical method.[53]

And Swinburne contended that Browning's so-called obscurity was actually the result of his quicksilver apprehension of perceptions simultaneously, rather than of a sluggish, muddy thought process. The poem was hard, but not through "obscurity of thought or language."[54] Browning for the most part was deliberately writing in the "new" language.

We see that if Sordello had sought "temporal" expressions for his visions, he would have communicated them more easily. He could not neglect the "thing itself," the "natural object," the white star flowers, for the pure white light of the single Star. Browning himself saw that perceptions originate from the senses, and must therefore appeal to the same senses when they are transferred into language. As Browning's maturer poems are discussed, we will see that the "still point of the turning world," the "infinite moment," can be contained in the image. Even when the poems are not abounding in imagery, Browning's aim from now on is consistent. He wishes to present as many and varied moments in time as possible, using experimental forms and re-created, rewrought language. Then, perchance, in the midst of these multitudinous experiences, eternity may break across time to provide the infinite moment.

It is the crowd who must try to fulfill the role of the poet, as they piece together the thoughts which Sordello "Has rent perception into." Is this not what Browning continually asks his readers to do, from this poem to The Ring and the Book with its address to the British Public who like him not?[55] The failure can be turned into the success of a new working of the medium, as the imperfect fragments gain an integrity of their own. Thus Browning's dramatic monologues are later to succeed in creating characters who are total beings as well as vehicles for the presentation of perceptions and ideas. And in the lyric poems in which character does not play such a large role, the imagery is the vehicle to bring ideas to life, with the multi-faceted presentation of the parts making up Browning's whole "multiverse."

We leave Sordello, then, at the end of Book the Second, to all appearances the failed poet. What happens to him in the remainder of the poem seems, on the surface, to concern more the man of action than the poet. Yet all the germs of this struggle for self-consciousness, for the "development of the soul," have had their beginnings in his poetic struggles. Near the end of the poem, his desire to become one concrete thing, to be fixed to one star, vies with his refusal to commit himself to either the Guelfs or the Ghibellines. He wants instead to give himself to the People, to their Now, their Life, in order to create a new Rome. He is not strong enough to bring this about, but in his commitment to something outside himself he has recognized the need for Love, and some of his earlier temptations are in this way overcome.

By the end of Book the Sixth Sordello has achieved a kind of success in failure (less clearly defined than in "Childe Roland"). This is because he has finally recognized the unbalanced relationship between his soul and his body. His failure to accept the limitations the body places on the soul in this life has made him impotent to act at all. He has been his own god and power, which has made him expect too much of himself. Although Sordello recognizes the worth of the "Small" (see VI, 521-528) he still demands an infinite amount of experience. Thus his "soul's absoluteness" puts too great a strain on his body's powers, and Sordello suffers a death seizure. He asks the burning question quoted earlier: "But does our knowledge reach / No farther?" In other words, is there nothing between joy in the incompleteness of life on earth, and the Whole which Eternity offers: "Is the cloud of hindrance broke / But by the failing of the fleshly yoke," by death? Does one have to brutalize the soul in the meantime?

Browning said once that the incidents in "the development of a soul" were the most important parts of Sordello.[56] Roma King feels that Browning means by this phrase the process of a character achieving self-awareness. But such awareness has a physical beginning. From Parleyings(1887),as King points out, we learn that the soul is equated with consciousness attained through the body:[57]

> . . . soul's first act
> (Call consciousness the soul--some name we need) [is]
> Getting itself aware, through stuff decreed
> Thereto (so call the body) . . . . ("With Francis Furini,"369-372)

Sordello only gradually reaches his self-awareness, at the expense of his life. It is not clear at the end whether he fully acknowledges the means whereby he could face up to his limitations--though the answer is given in the narration. He would need to acknowledge Love as one of the attributes of God, and find a representative of God's love on earth. According to William Whitla, Sordello (and the poet) was to be a

"Christ-type," making his thoughts and perceptions incarnate in his art. But he fails to "thrust into time the concern of eternity as happened at the Incarnation."[58]

In Book the Third three kinds of poet are distinguished, in Browning's direct commentary:

> So occupied, then, are we: hitherto,
> At present, and a weary while to come,
> The office of ourselves,--nor blind nor dumb
> And seeing somewhat of man's state,--has been
> The worst of us, to say they so have seen;
> The better, what it was they saw; the best,
> Impart the gift of seeing to the rest . . . . (III, 862-868)

The third kind of poet, one of the "Makers-see," (III, 928) is the visionary prophet.[59] He would seem to combine the roles of "seer" and "fashioner," distinguished in The Essay on Shelley, into the whole poet's function of beholding with an understanding keenness the universe, nature, and man, in their actual state of perfection in imperfection.[60] Sordello at his poetic best, in his descriptions, "enables the audience to close their eyes and feel the 'strings of blossoms' or the arch of 'hazels' that they seem to brush in passing."[61] Sordello approaches, and Browning himself will reach, the point where they combine the objective and subjective roles of poet, to become the new poet who is called upon to get at "new substances by breaking up the assumed wholes into parts of independent and unclassed value, careless of the unknown laws for recombining them. . . prodigal of objects for men's outer not inner sight; shaping for their uses a new and different creation from the last . . . ."[62] Browning's own words best describe his station as a poet.

In Sordello, DeVane writes, "Browning made considerable progress in discovering and curing, at least for a time, his difficulties in conveying his vast abstract impressions and conceptions through his language; and he learned the necessity of dealing with sense objects directly and simply, if he wished to be heard."[63] For our purposes, certain passages in Sordello have constituted Browning's "manifesto" and "survey of the functions and responsibilities of poetry," as Lionel Stevenson points out.[64] Browning has explored the means to bridge the gap, to contain the infinite variety of the universe within his own uniqueness and limited capacity. Language is the medium for the infinite, and Browning will continue to concentrate upon the "natural object" as an expression of the abstract in the poems of the middle period and in The Ring and the Book. Indeed, to conclude this chapter we will move forward to an examination of the art monologues from Men and Women which are crucial to understanding Browning's aesthetics and psychology, particularly in relation to the role of nature in poetry and life.

## C: "The Value and Significance of Flesh"

The monologues on art are rather a special case in Browning's canon, for the artist's aesthetic concerns are also the poet's. Indeed, G. Wilson Knight sees poetry, a temporal art, to be so adapted as to include and blend together the other arts, "fusing the visual with the aural, space with time, at every instant. One of its favorite devices is to create ultimate symbols which hold such opposing qualities in mysterious identity. . . ."[65] This statement seems appropriate to Browning's poetry, with its strong tactile, visual senses, and its themes in art which apply equally to sculpture and architecture, as well as painting. In the monologues on painting two of the problems which emerge are the concern of all the arts: first, the need to understand imperfection and its place in the scheme of art and life; second, the need to define and relate body and soul in both art and life. These themes acquire a heightened significance in two poems in particular, "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Andrea del Sarto," although they are not absent from the monologues on love and religion, either.

To clarify the relationships between imperfection and perfection, body and soul, some of the major premises from Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic" should be examined. Ruskin and Browning have already been seen to counterpoint one another at various places in their art. The greatest oneness of thought may be seen by comparing Ruskin's "Nature of Gothic" with the concepts (and form) of the art monologues published by Browning in the same period. Ruskin writes: "But,accurately speaking, no good work whatever can be perfect, and the demand for perfection is always a sign of misunderstanding of the ends of art."[66] This dramatic and absolute statement follows an appraisal of Gothic architecture, which Ruskin feels has been condemned for the very qualities for which it should be praised, its roughness and savageness. (Compare the accusation of "barbarism" brought by Santayana against Browning for his rough style and rougher philosophy.) Speaking in broader terms, Ruskin tells us that Christian art should be seen to surpass Greek art, because the former recognizes the value of freedom and the accompanying imperfection: "Therefore, to every spirit which Christianity summons to her service, her exhortation is: Do what you can, and confess frankly what you are unable to do; neither let your effort be shortened for fear of failure, nor your confession silenced for fear of shame."[67]

The Gothic schools of architecture were willing to accept the imperfect fragments which were the labours of inferior minds and see these fragments raised in an "unaccusable whole." The English mind, Ruskin feels, desires the greatest perfection any being is capable of, which is praiseworthy only if ends are not made to justify means. If the nature is lower, as that of an animal, it will naturally reach its own perfection more easily, but a perfection which is inferior to man's imperfections. Browning expresses this idea very explicitly in"Too Late" from Dramatis Personae:

Let the mere star-fish in his vault
   Crawl in a wash of weed, indeed,
Rose-jacynth to the finger-tips:
   He, whole in body and soul, outstrips
Man, found with either in default.

But what's whole, can increase no more,
   Is dwarfed and dies, since here's its sphere.

To the same degree, this is true within the species man, too. His works, if perfection is achieved, are less fine in nature than those works which by their very complexity, richness and individuality preclude the achievement of perfection.[68] Humanity implies imperfection, which, according to Ruskin,

> . . . is in some sort essential to all that we know of life. It is the sign of life in a mortal body, that is to say, of a state of progress and change. Nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent. The foxglove blossom,--a third part bud, a third part past, a third part in full bloom,--is a type of the life of this world. And in all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty.[69]

Men should, however, strive for perfection, even though a contradiction seems implied. Browning, perhaps more than Ruskin, sees perfection as a possible spiritual state at the end of the upward spiral of change and progress. In aiming higher, and achieving less than the ultimate, we are more noble than if we are content with a lower goal. The essence of the infinite moment is that it cannot be perfectly held, for it is both past and future, complete and incomplete.

The area of art where Browning and Ruskin depart from one another outwardly, if not in spirit, is the period of the Renaissance. For Ruskin the Renaissance marks the beginning "of the fall of the arts of Europe" because of "relentless requirement of perfection, incapable alike either of being silenced by veneration for greatness, or softened into forgiveness of simplicity."[70] Browning, on the other hand, both admires and finds affinity with the Renaissance as manifest in Italy. He chooses two Renaissance artists depicted in Vasari's Lives of the Painters, Andrea del Sarto and Fra Lippo Lippi, to be the personae of two of his most successful dramatic monologues. And as William Whitla says in The Central Truth, Browning sees the Renaissance as one of the three crises in history where time crosses eternity, second in importance only to the Incarnation. However, after choosing the two artists who caught his interest from Vasari's Lives, Browning then makes them non-historical in a sense. In fact the theories they voice pertain as much to the nineteenth century as to the Renaissance. Their essential qualities as artists either mirror Ruskin's theory of the imperfect, or set the theory in relief.

Fra Lippo Lippi is one of Browning's most sympathetically evolved characters. It is only when we examine the poem as more than a character study that we can place Lippi in ironic context. Lippi is slightly the charlatan, the artist whose life belies his art. But, unlike Mr. Sludge, he is aware of the dichotomy himself, and he strives to overcome it, to the point of overreacting to the uniformity and lack of realism which characterize the worst of Medieval art. (Two other poems which must be kept in mind for a true perspective of "Fra Lippo Lippi" are "Old Pictures in Florence" in which Browning praises the creations of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance in order to criticize Greek art, and "Pictor Ignotus" in which the unknown late Medieval painter stresses soul at the expense of body.)

The animal imagery in "Fra Lippo Lippi" is very alive, with the liveliness of the monk himself as he skips between the cloister and the brothel. It consists of scurrying rats, mice, and rabbits, all viewed sympathetically by Lippi. The plant imagery occurs chiefly in excerpts from faintly humorous and ribald Florentine folk-songs which Lippi sings, mourning the transience of sensual pleasures.[71] Many of the organic images in the poem are of refuse and of food. The artist-priest knows much about catching scraps of food, about capturing in a quick-sketch the forgotten, low-cast or criminal elements of his society. Thus his realistic painting is not founded on materialism but on his own human vision which sees soul in beauty and ugliness alike. The poem also makes much use of hand and body imagery, with their inherent tactility. They serve to affirm Lippi's basic physicality, his need for human contact.

The speaker of "Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister," the monk who hates Brother Lawrence with such a vengeance, makes a striking contrast to Fra Lippo Lippi. He masks his own sensuality and projects it upon another; Lippi would not understand such self-frustration. The speaker's imagery too is oriented towards plants and flowers, but only so that he can express his hatred for them, for their cultivation. David Sonstroem provides an interesting analysis of the poem which is appropriate to this examination of Brother Lippi. The speaker would like to be in the world of flesh and blood outside the cloister. He "is rendered ridiculous not for being a beast, but rather for trying to be other than the beast he is, for frustrating his own animal nature. Here, in the cloister, it is the castrated Brother Lawrence who bears fruit, the 'Barbary corsair' of a monk who is impotent."[72] His lust and his hatred both must be sublimated, and although he pinches off the melon-buds, it is he who is "pruned perpetually and painfully, as his animal nature feebly but continually insists upon expressing itself. Psychologically he is caged; beasts come to mind, but only domesticated ones. Caught between jungle and cloister, id and superego, he is certainly human enough in his predicament."[73] Thus we sympathize with the animal, pagan side of man, represented by the speaker. Lippi, too, is slightly more domesticated and hampered than he would like to be, it is true. But he refers ironically to himself as a beast, scorns but does not hate the prior and his kind, and manages to allow some of his unconscious desires to surface--in his paintings and in his occasional perambulations at night.

The central passage in the poem shows the degree of Lippi's awareness. He is explaining why he cannot go on painting saints and more saints, without rebellion:

For, doing most, there's pretty sure to come
A turn, some warm eve finds me at my saints--
A laugh, a cry, the business of the world--
(*Flower o' the peach,*
*Death for us all, and his own life for each*!)
And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over,
The world and life's too big to pass for a dream
And I do these wild things in sheer despite,
And play the fooleries you catch me at,
In pure rage! The old mill-horse, out at grass
After hard years, throws up his stiff heels so,
Although the miller does not preach to him
The only good of grass is to make chaff.
What would men have? Do they like grass or no--
May they or mayn't they? all I want's the thing
Settled for ever one way. As it is,
You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:
You don't like what you only like too much,
You do like what, if given at your word,
You find abundantly detestable.
For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
I always see the garden and God there
A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,
The value and significance of flesh,
I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards. (245-269)

This passage can be broken into two basic landscapes, linked by a set of statements which succinctly express the theory of repression first formalized by Freud. The landscape where the old horse is put out to pasture is a metaphor for life lived on the sensual level. Lippi, as he is locked up to paint his saints, is like the mill-horse. He still feels the need to kick up his heels, partake of life, even though he does not know that "The only good of grass is to make chaff." The other landscape is a garden, the Garden of Eden, where Eve is being created for man. One landscape raises the question of hypocrisy about sensual pleasures, "grass," and ends with accusatory statements directed to "you" the audience. The second garden affirms "The value and significance of flesh" to Lippi, and neither lesson is he willing to forget. Life is too large "to pass for a dream"; its reality is "imaged" in this major passage from the poem. These images which act as symbols are integral with the whole poem. They explain the nature of Lippi's temptations of the flesh, his lusting for the Eves of the backstreets of Florence, where Eden can also exist. But the significance of Lippi's heartfelt cry goes beyond his life and into his art. Here is how David Shaw describes the "dialectic of flesh and spirit" which is active through the poem:

> Near the opening of the monologue there is a reference to Fra Lippo as a "beast." But as the monk lifts the dialogue to a philosophic plane by using the same conceit of man's physical nature: "Being simple bodies," we see that the "beast" is not simply a metaphor for sensuality. Fra Lippo passes from his intercourse with "the girls" to his Socratic intercourse with the officers on the sacramental status of man's creatural realism. . . . The highest level is reached, and the dialectic of flesh and spirit is momentarily resolved, as Fra Lippo discerns, in analogy to the Christian Incarnation, the immanence of a spiritual power in nature that will enable him to "interpret God to all of you!"[74]

Lippi has been accused, and boasts, of painting "Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true / As much as pea and pea!" The Prior continues his admonishment:

> Your business is not to catch men with show,
> With homage to the perishable clay,
> But lift them over it, ignore it all,
> Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
> Your business is to paint the souls of men--
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> Give us no more of body than shows soul! (179-188)

(Contrast the context of "Let the visible go to the dogs" from "Old Pictures in Florence.") The Prior wants a Giotto, or even a Pictor Ignotus--someone to lead men straight to God without the intervention and distraction of "lines, colours" and other realistic concerns of the artist. Lippi's answer is that one shows God to men by painting man and nature so that they seem new to the beholder.

Now, is this sense, I ask?
A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further
And can't fare worse!
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn,
Left foot and right foot, go a double step,
Make his flesh liker, and his soul more like,
Both in their order? (198-208)

He loves the human form with its frailties, and even excuses his own frailties by his rationalizations on art and life. Baker writes, "In this plea for realism in art, portraying both body and soul, Browning not only catches the spirit of the Renaissance revolt against Medieval asceticism, but also defends his own poetic practice. Neither Browning nor the Renaissance swings to the extreme of eliminating 'soul' entirely, though they conceived of the soul differently."[75] Beauty may exist without soul, Fra Lippo tells us, but even so, you will find the soul within yourself as you acknowledge the beauty. Lippi has individual soul, life-force, in abundance, so that his cup runneth over; it is impossible to fully separate body and soul as he uses the terms.[76] However, it is possible to reconcile the philosophy of art "preached" here with the praise allotted some of the Medieval painters in "Old Pictures in Florence." Neither poem calls for perfection at the expense of soul.

David Shaw further explains how "Fra Lippo Lippi" combines philosophy and drama, doctrine and art. Ideas need flesh to be convincing, (in line with the theory of imagery which Browning is evolving from Sordello onwards):

> In Fra Lippo's resolve to "add[the] soul" to his transcription of the "flesh," Browning is clearly anticipating the evolution of the equal relation, a union of substance and spirit, as it appears both in the classical style of Italian painting and in the doctrines of philosophic "realism". . . .[77]

The dichotomy or polarity, however, is never completely overcome--in ideas, in styles, within the poem. Its presence accounts for bluster giving way to introversion in the persona; or for images of dreams and shadow, in the last section for example, juxtaposing themselves with the artist's own fleshly pleasures. The struggle between flesh and spirit is captured within the frame of Fra Lippo's last painting, full of saints, but with the figure of the artist drawn into their midst, imagining that a game of "hot cockles" might be played there. Lippi's affirmation that he is important among the saints, as their "creator," is ironic: "Could Saint John there draw-- / His camel-hair make up a painting-brush?" We grant Lippi his place, and so do the angels; yet even there he is busy scuttling away from such revered company, "not letting go / The palm of her, the little lily thing." The flesh is real, and Fra Lippo's images are from real life, as he enthusiastically embraces all experience. For him, in spite of his internal and external dialogue, the flesh seems to transcend the spirit, to be the higher reality. However, if we think, again, of soul as consciousness attained through the body, some of the tension in Lippi's character is resolved, for surely he is reaching towards such awareness. Browning believes that the body does reveal the soul, and from the appearance of the naked Andromeda in Pauline to "Parleying with Francis Furini," Browning, according to Robert Langbaum, "defends the nude in painting, by showing that the nude figure is more symbolic than the clothed figure, and symbolic precisely of soul."[78] Lippi cannot paint the nude woman in his art "Just as God made them" as did Francis Furini, but he is nonetheless aware of the "value and significance of flesh."

However, there are other aspects to Browning's goal of reconciling flesh and spirit, of making experience a transcending, fulfilling thing. Perhaps all his ideas are embodied in his concept of Incarnation, a recurring symbol and theme in his poetry. The Incarnation should be mentioned here, for it has psychological and aesthetic connotations, as well as religious ones. The Incarnation transcends any creed or dogma and exists out of time and space while, paradoxically, it is linked to the temporal and spatial. Although William Whitla has done a major study of the theological aspects of Incarnation in Browning's poetry, I want to explain how it is linked to Browning's other imagery, specifically to the animal and plant images being examined. Through them is made, as the previous discussion shows, a mysterious but intense suggestion of life and energy burgeoning throughout nature. Man is closely, but not totally, in alliance with this life. But through the idea of Incarnation, of the word made flesh (and the Word is Love, as will be seen), there is a further linking not just with energy in nature, but with divine energy. Incarnation, which in itself is an unexplainable linking of flesh and spirit, provides a philosophical scheme for unifying everything. If, in the moment of human love man is in complete harmony with nature, the concept of divine Love would make this harmony all-encompassing and truly infinite. In the psychological experience of Browning's personae, however, the idea of Incarnation is sometimes present only by implication, and at many times is totally absent. Then we need to rely more fully on the animal and plant imagery to define the psychological moment, which may be a negative, not a positive one.

As David Shaw recognizes, the Incarnation is present by implication in "Fra Lippo Lippi" with its insistence on the value of flesh in a divine painting. Like all the monologues, that poem represents a critical moment in the life of the *persona*, a moment redefining past and future, although it may not be an infinite one. The setting is the Renaissance, containing within it, according to Whitla, the "infinite moment" of the Incarnation. Both are critical moments in history, both affirm individuality, and in them the human body and spirit can become one. Of course their similarities are in spirit more than in fact. But Whitla sees the Renaissance as a *kairos*, a "time-with-content," in the *chronos* of history. The artist is equipped "to find in the Incarnation of love the means of coming to the redemption of time."[79] The importance of the Incarnation will be seen again, particularly in the dramatic lyrics on human love, in the religious monologues, and in *The Ring and the Book*. Meanwhile, we move from an artist who, although he may not transcend a Fra Angelico, does reaffirm and re-create life in his art, to the faultless painter who misses the very meaning of life in his art.

A brief glance at the imagery of "Andrea del Sarto" places that artist on a very different plane from Fra Lippo Lippi. Andrea too is an inhabitant of Florence. Yet he lives like a bat, cloistered up within his four grey walls, not perforce as was Lippi, but by his own choice and lack of will. The colours which dominate are not the deep shadows illuminated by street lanterns, nor the pure, clear colours of realism. Rather, they are tones of grey, silvery twilight, colouring del Sarto's setting and his paintings alike. Grey is symbolic of neutralization, egoism, depression, inertia and indifference. Browning portrays his artist, however sympathetically, as embodying all these qualities. There is little animal or plant imagery in this poem, but some interesting patterns of body imagery.

The hand imagery in "Fra Lippo Lippi" is very active: "Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand," hands throw him scraps of food, his hands are always busy with his brush, imaging real bodies such as Lucy's, whose hand tries to lead him into the company of angels. By contrast, the hands in "Andrea del Sarto" are either the entrapping ones of Lucrezia or the ineffectual, almost passive, ones of the painter. The hand is used in protective, encompassing images, symbolic of Andrea's desire to shut himself away from the real world. He shuts into Lucrezia's "small hand" the money from his paintings, as a bribe so that she will sit quietly by him, "your hand in mine." One of the most evocative images in the poem is this one in which the part stands for the whole: "Your soft hand is a woman of itself, / And mine the man's bared breast she curls inside "(21-22). It substantiates the serpent image which follows a few lines later: "My serpentining beauty, rounds on rounds!"--her hair, her ears, her hands, coil about him, sinuous and undulating like a snake. She is the Eve in his Eden, tempting him; his own desire is to curl up in this Eden, and if it becomes a hell, that is easier to bear than facing the sun outside. The imagery of gold, which is also important in this poem, is combined with hand imagery when Andrea pleads with Lucrezia,

> Let my hands frame your face in your hair's gold,
> You beautiful Lucrezia that are mine! (175-176)

The irony is that he is in no way her possessor. Andrea uses his belief that "we are in God's hand" to justify his own lack of will: "So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!"

Andrea del Sarto's hands become the symbol for his soul as, in his failure, he speaks of "This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine" (82). For he is the "Faultless Painter," which title means in terms of the theory of the imperfect that he has aimed for a lower goal, and in achieving it "perfectly" has lost his soul. (One must be careful to make a fine distinction between Fra Lippo's realism, and Andrea's stress on perfect representation.) The climactic tactile image in the poem is the cry, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?" (97-98). This is the poetic equivalent for Ruskin's idea of the imperfect, with Browning's addition that perfection is a state attained in heaven. Man should strive beyond his powers, knowing the results will show a measure of human imperfection. If he aims lower, the perfect whole he may achieve will, like del Sarto's paintings, lack soul and be less than the works of a Raphael.

The perfection of the persona's art is analogous to the perfection he sees in Lucrezia:

> But had you--oh, with the same perfect brow,
> And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
> And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
> The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare--
> Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind! (122-126)

The simile of bird being led to the snare reveals the control Lucrezia had over her husband's freewill. Fra Lippo Lippi believed that beauty and naught else was the best thing God invents, and he could not forget the value and significance of flesh as symbolized by Eve. Thus his attempt to balance flesh and spirit tips the scales in favour of the former. But his Eve is all women, and leaves him free; Andrea's is one woman without soul who has snared his own consciousness and self-awareness. Ironically, he believes the soul that his paintings lack on earth will be added in heaven, that a new chance will be given. In this life he is not willing to give up the one thing he possesses which "Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo" do not--Lucrezia.

Elizabeth Bieman interprets "Andrea del Sarto" in terms of Platonic and Neoplatonic treatises on love. Andrea is a "half-man," a "moon-man," rather than a fully rounded figure using both his masculine and feminine capabilities. She concludes:

> His sin is one of omission--and it is one sin ultimately, the failure to commit himself actively in love, to his parents, to Lucrezia, to the king, to his art, to the One he calls God or Fate who did offer through the king the golden light he has rejected. Andrea has failed to participate in the Neoplatonic circuit of love, which streams from heaven to earth and upwards again in man's aspiration. Self-separated from the golden stream, he has so atrophied that he is now a travesty of all the true lover and great artist should be.[80]

Lucrezia, who is perfect body, has eclipsed Andrea's sun. However, surely Andrea's failure in commitment begins with his lack of involvement in the world, and the things of nature. The actual sparsity of life-giving imagery attests to this failure. Andrea del Sarto seems suspended in a grey twilight zone in which he lacks both body and soul.

To say that the choice facing Browning's artist-poets in poems from Sordello to "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto" is between life in the abstract and life in its concrete realities would be an over-simplification. However, the choice is critical, as will be more fully revealed in the discussion of a wider selection of poems from

Browning's middle period. We have seen the relation between the world of tangible objects and the source material for the artist, be he Sordello, Keats, Pound--or Browning. The spiritual world is implied for Browning in the physical, and at the right moments the two do indeed unite. But much of the time the interest of artist and reader is in the process, in the reworking and revitalizing of language so that it captures the perceptions and ideas. At the same time, however much artist, and then reader, bring to the poem, there is that which eludes, which is transient and lost in the moment of reading, yet which may lead to a transcendent moment when words fall into place.

# CHAPTER II

## THE MIDDLE PERIOD: THROUGH A GLASS MINUTELY

A mote of sand, you know, a blade of grass--
What was so despicable as mere grass,
Except perhaps the life o' the worm or fly
Which fed there? These were "small" and men were great.
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Somebody turns our spyglass round, or else
Puts a new lens in it: grass, worm, fly grow big:
We find great things are made of little things,
And little things go lessening till at last
Comes God behind them. Talk of moutains now?
We talk of mould that heaps the mountain, mites
That throng the mould, and God that makes the mites.(1104-16)

--Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'"

### A: Introduction

We discover that it is the particular, the individual, and quite often the relatively small and insignificant, upon which Browning focusses in his imagery. Thus at times he bears some resemblance to his "Medium," Sludge, who examines microscopically "each now with its infinitude / Of influences." Although Mr. Sludge looks after his own interest, and hopes to affirm his own value by arguing for the worth of the lowliest parasite (even the stomach-cyst), sometimes his microscopic examination does yield him magnified results. The passage quoted from his apologia contains at least a pinpoint of truth, (even though Sludge elsewhere speaks of calling grubs--small lies--dragonflies, for that is what they grow to). Here one reads into the description an "image" for Browning's creative approach and concept of imagery, and for his concern with the natural object or organism, be it mountain or mite. Browning, from Paracelsus on, has presented variations of the argument from design to prove God's existence. But here the argument is of psychological rather than theological importance. Perhaps even the miscreant Sludge sees the possibility that the lowliest creature might affirm God incarnate; or sees that a "Something" might be approached through, or behind, the smallest miracle of life.

Browning seeks to reveal the souls of his personae in a very special way, through the minutiae of the organic life which in fact he uses to embody their souls. Basil Willey says very aptly: "Today we talk familiarly about the subconscious, and think we are speaking more scientifically than our predecessors who discoursed about 'the soul.'"[1] Although Browning in "Parleying with Francis Furini"specifically defines the soul as consciousness attained through the body, it is fair to say that he is often aware of the soul as not fully conscious, and indeed often means the unconscious part of his personae, still awaiting development or awakening, when he refers to their souls. The organic life around the personae often reveals more of their souls or their unconscious states than they are aware of as they utter the images in their monologues. Browning's characters have an unconscious existence of which their creator is fully aware; his poetry displays what Coleridge means by Imagination, as Willey tells us: that "which springs from the energy of the poets' whole being, and in us . . . 'calls the soul into activity, with the subordination of the faculties to each other according to their several worth and dignity.'"[2] In contrast, the poetry of Fancy is "merely made or contrived in the top layer of consciousness."[3] Browning probes life with the energy of his "whole being" and also re-creates it on more than one level: there is the dramatic human world; there is also the equally dramatic animal and plant world.

Browning's aesthetic theories about imagery and poetry, particularly as they involve natural and sensory imagery, have been viewed in certain illustrative poems and in *Sordello*. Now we move fully into the middle period of his poetry, to the relatively shorter and more dramatic poems published between 1842 and 1864: *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), *Men and Women* (1855), and *Dramatis Personae* (1864), where we will explore the abundance of animal and plant imagery to be found.[4] "In his poetry after *Sordello*," Roma King tells us,

> . . . Browning for a while gave up hope of achieving the total vision and contented himself with the patient observation and careful depiction of those fragments of Infinity permitted him. Multiplicity and diversity rather than completeness and singleness became his aim. Hence, the dramatis personae. Each of his men and women represents another fragment of the tantalizing but unattainable whole.[5]

King is doubtless alluding to Browning's famous confession to Elizabeth Barrett, mentioned in the Introduction, but now quoted in full: "You speak out, *you*,--I only make men & women speak--give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me: but I am going to try . . . ."[6] Part of his "trying" resulted in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*(1850) wherein his wife's influence might possibly be detected; certainly the influence of the religious controversies of the first half of the century may be seen. But even in the shorter, seemingly more objective poems, such as those in *Men and Women*, I feel that Browning does speak out through his poetry as a body, and that the poems are more than mere facets of light, separated from one another. Between the earlier monologues and those poems in *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personae* there is also a decided development and expansiveness, as if Browning were allowing the *personae* to reveal more about themselves, quite often unconsciously, through their imagery, and also to reveal their creator's voice beneath the whole.

I believe that Browning is definitely suggesting, in large measure through organic imagery, what a greater vision of the whole might be if the light of truth ever shone forth uncovered, rather than through chinks in the darkness of its "shade." The poems *are* units, but too often this is all they are taken to be. Certain key images repeat themselves in endless variants during this period, then reach a culmination within *The Ring and the Book*. These images I take to be the embodiment in miniature of the larger world of human beings, men and women, brought to life in the poems.

It is because Browning saw the "natural object" as "adequate symbol" that I have chosen the images to be examined from nature, from the animal and plant worlds. Natural imagery does not merely illustrate Browning's major themes of the interrelation between finite and infinite, perfection and imperfection, body and soul. It is integral with them. The need to work from the concrete to the abstract, to stress life and creativity over death and sterility underlies the aesthetic and psychological theories of the dramatic lyrics, romances, and monologues, and could not be expressed without natural imagery. Although "Parleying With Christopher Smart" written about 1885 falls outside the chronological scope of this discussion, Browning's admiration for that poet is significant. Robert Langbaum writes that for Browning, as for Smart (a realist or symbolist poet),

> . . . poetry is . . . a revelation and should make the effect of a revelation. Smart achieves his effect not by giving an exhaustive catalogue of details like modern naturalists, nor by concerning himself like the aesthetes with appearances only. Smart used his *selected* details as symbols—making them stand for the rest and

> imbuing them with ideas and moral meaning. He does not . . . like the scientists and their followers, start with abstract laws that when applied to nature must inevitably devalue it. Smart's ideas are inseparable from the palpably rendered objects that embody them. He gives in his "Song to David" the truth about nature, because he gives "her lovelinesses infinite / In little. . . ["Parleying With Christopher Smart"].

Browning's own unwillingness to apply abstractions to his characters and to his art is evident from Sordello, where indeed the poet learns that he must give nature's "lovelinesses infinite / In little," through The Ring and the Book where the poet expresses the infinite soul of Pompilia by means of a succession of natural images.

Browning's poetry is not overtly striving to "hymn" nature, although in "Saul," for example, strongly influenced by Smart, that function is served. Rather he selects his details from nature in order to convey his ideas about human nature. Browning does demonstrate at times the scientist's microscopic concern and vision for detail (witness the passage quoted above from "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'"), but these details are still selected for a particular context or pattern. Browning uses images of animals and plants, just as he uses other imagery, to heighten, clarify, and provide new levels of understanding for the characters he creates in his dramatic poems and the situations in which they find themselves at a particular moment in time. In very few cases are the images used only in a naturalistic, descriptive way, unless their purpose is cumulatively to build up a sensual mood, as in certain parts of "Saul." More often the images, although certainly they are realistic word pictures evoking the senses, have dramatic or symbolic overtones and perhaps also are part of a larger archetypal or mythical pattern. Their meaning emerges not in mere suggestiveness, but in a most particular and "concrete" exactness. For example, animals and plants may be given human characteristics, and landscapes may be anthropomorphic. Images used with exactitude may come to embody in little the whole meaning of a certain poem, or the essense of a dramatis persona.

When one comes to make choices illustrating its function, the natural imagery in Browning's poetry is rather daunting by its sheer volume. This very abundance must be dealt with, however, as one facet of Browning's poetic affirmation of all life and of his vision of the human psyche. In using art to tell the truth obliquely in all of his poetry, as The Ring and the Book does on such an immense scale, Browning conveys part of the truth in the very presence of hundreds of animal and plant images. In the animal world alone there are allusions to many species of birds, to myriad insects, serpents, fish, frogs, scorpions, mice, the famous rats of all colours and sizes, sea creatures, parasites, goats, stags, wolves, foxes, lambs, leopards, lynxes, apes, cats (wild and domestic), rabbits, dogs, horses, and even to the fabulous dragon, the monstrous, mythical sea-bull, and the chimaera. To make an exhaustive inventory of this bestiary would serve no illuminating function.

What is true of the fauna is true of the flora also. Browning knew about horticulture and closely differentiated among species of plants and flowers for poetic purposes. His natural images using plants appeal on the surface to the sense of sight, but gradually reach all our senses, particularly the all-embracing tactile sense. Browning even wrote to Miss Fanny Haworth: "I have, you are to know, such a love for flowers and leaves . . . that I every now and then,--in an impatience at being unable to possess myself of them thoroughly, to see them quite, satiate myself with their scent,--bite them to bits."[8] Like a Lawrentian character who straddles the line between involvement in, and possession of, nature, Browning here demonstrates that at times more than his poet's "eye" was on the object.

Browning indeed observed first-hand, as one critic claimed, what other poets only studied in books.[9] It is appropriate to examine here a poem which argues the need for the artist to have personal experience in order to re-create nature. "'Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books'" also proves a natural introduction to the sections of this chapter on insects, the spider and the rose, the bee and the flower, and on love poems and religious monologues involving such imagery.

The poem contrasts Boehme, the Protestant mystic of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, with John of Halberstadt, a Medieval magician or alchemist who conjures up the mystic rose. He, like the poet with his image, is able to capture and re-create the very essence of the rose, which has taken the mystic many hard volumes to define.

> Then, who helps more, pray, to repair our loss--
> Another Boehme with a tougher book
> And subtler meanings of what roses say,--
> Or some stout Mage like him of Halberstadt,
> John, who made things Boehme wrote thoughts about?
> He with a "look you" vents a brace of rhymes,
> And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,
> Over us, under, round us every side,
> Nay, in and out the table and the chairs
> And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all,--
> Buries us with a glory, young once more,
> Pouring heaven into this shut house of life. (34-45)

Poetry, like alchemy, involves a transmutation of raw materials as Book I of The Ring and the Book describes. Browning, like every poet, we remember from Sordello, must strive to contain the infinite in the finite, but he does so by working from the "real" or concrete to the abstract or ideal. In this way he is more the "mage" than the "mystic." He uses words to re-create something which transcends words, in this case the "sudden rose herself." What value is it, the critic asks, that Boehme discovered "plants could speak" and the "daisy had an eye indeed," if, after reading his long colloquies, we look up to find the "summer past"? The poem ends with these words of the persona, himself a poet, addressed to his brother poet, advising him in a musical metaphor to return to what he does best:

> So come, the harp back to your heart again!
> You are a poet, though your poem's naught.
> The best of all you showed before, believe,
> Was your own boy-face o'er the finer chords
> Bent, following the cherub at the top
> That points to God with his paired half-moon wings. (46-51)

It is the poet's place, then, to sing, to drape "naked thoughts" in "sights and sounds," to consider "the singer not the song."[10] (This message must be weighed against that of the conscious, introspective poet described in Sordello who thinks too much of singer and too little of song.) The poem is a transmutation, a magical incarnation, then, of feeling; it is the fleshification of thought pouring heaven into our house of life, pointing to God. Browning, even while he speaks of pure image-making, is of course combining thought and word. He stresses the singing function of poetry partly in answer to criticism that he is moving from the position of poet who seeks for "images and melody" to the kind of poet who presents "reason" and "thought."

It has been suggested that Browning is criticizing himself as the poet of Sordello, vowing to write no more tomes "in Six Books."[11] Actually, it is impossible for a poet to be either only singer, or only thinker, for the two parts are interdependent. It is interesting that Boehme, who is used here only as an example of a heavy pedant, is more recently described as the "theologian of the resurrected body" who influenced Blake and, in line of succession, Freud.[12] In fact, what Boehme discovered and wished to express in numerous volumes was what Browning expressed in poetry accused of being like prose, in a work as long as the original "Transcendentalism," The Ring and the Book.

The natural image central to "'Transcendentalism'" is the rose, used as a symbol for the creative act of the poet. The rose has other more dramatic roles to play in terms of the personae in Browning's poems and we will examine some of these roles, for the rose will be selected as the representative recurring plant image. Other inhabitants of the garden, although they are more ubiquitous, insects, and in particular the spider, will also be examined. The interplay between good and evil, innocence and experience, which goes on through the medium of spider and rose images will be included. The following section will concern itself with bee-flower image clusters for they symbolize the transformation or transition between innocence and experience occurring in the various personae. Poems here are mainly about love in its physical aspects (symbolized in nature) leading to the spiritual. Therefore, two dramatic lyrics on love will be closely examined as they integrate the various plant and animal images already seen. Finally, exegeses will be made of four major religious monologues in which the personae, through the particular natural images they use, reveal very startlingly the "image" each of them has of God.

## B: Insects: A Microcosm

At the lower end of the animal chain of being, the insect occupies a place in Browning's imagery out of all proportion to its size. I want to look briefly at the significance of this multiple insect life as a whole. It is interesting that for Browning himself the insect world is not a sinister one: he writes to Elizabeth Barrett in 1846 of his "odd liking for 'vermin'" as well as for the water-eft. He continues:

> I always loved all those wild creatures God 'sets up for themselves' so independently of us, so successfully, with their strange happy minute inch of a candle, as it were, to light them; while we run about and against each other with our great cressets and fire-pots. I once saw a solitary bee ripping a leaf round till it exactly fitted the front of a hole; his nest, no doubt; or tomb, perhaps--. . . .Well it seemed awful to watch that bee--he seemed so instantly from the teaching of God![13]

This letter affirms the message of "'Transcendentalism'" and also is most relevant in terms of an earlier poem, "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis," in which the undercurrent of insect life overrides man's learning. In that poem nature is pitted against the printed word--and nature wins. A book which is wearing down the persona (perhaps Browning) one warm summer day is summarily disposed of through burial in the crevice of a plum-tree, and then covered with blossoms. Next morning, "A spider had spun his web across, / And sat in the midst with arms akimbo." The speaker imagines the author to be covered like his book with the creeping, crawling things:

How did he like it when the live creatures
  Tickled and toused and browsed him all over,
And worm, slug, eft, with serious features
  Came in, each one, for his right of trover?

--When the water-beetle with great blind deaf face
  Made of her eggs the stately deposit,
And the newt borrowed just so much of the preface
  As tiled in the top of his black wife's closet? (49-56)

The book is uncomfortably full of "life" in a way that it and the persona were not before. In this humorous poem the insects need stand for nothing but themselves, although they may parody the itinerant, blind, human "browser." To deny the senses is to be as blind as the beetle who gropes only with the lower senses. Browning is deliberately irreverent as he imagines "All that life and fun and romping, / And that frisking and twisting and coupling" (57-58) between the pages of the book, although he eventually has it rescued from its plight.

Miss Barrett, in replying to Browning's letter, refers also to this poem when she writes,

> Your letter would be worth them all, if you were less you! I mean, just this letter, . . all alive as it is with crawling buzzing wriggling cold-blooded warmblooded creatures . . as all alive as your own pedant's book in the tree. . . . So . . love me a little, with the spiders & the toads & the lizards! love me as you love the efts-- . . . .[14]

I feel, like Miss Barrett, that the poem and the letter are at least in some measure representative of Browning. David Shaw sees the poem as more objective, the "close-up of a 'primitive' who keeps focusing upon the crawling side of nature. He sees the world in terms of the spider's arms and water beetle's face, and even uses sexual metonymy to transfer to the body of nature parts of the human anatomy."[15] However, Shaw thinks that the laughter eventually turns against the speaker, and that the poem "exposes the aberration of any merely sensual point of view."[16]

Browning would surely not see such a vision of the human in the insect-life around him as an "aberration."

Other poems with an abundance of "crawling buzzing wriggling" creatures include "Caliban Upon Setebos" and "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium.'" One good example from the second poem is this passage with the recurrent image of the ant-eater; (for Sludge insinuates his way into, and feeds off, the lower elements of society as the ant-eater feeds off nature):

> You must take
> A certain turn of mind for this,--a twist
> I' the flesh, as well. Be lazily alive,
> Open-mouthed, like my friend the ant-eater,
> Letting all nature's loosely-guarded motes
> Settle and, slick, be swallowed! Think yourself
> The one i' the world, the one for whom the world
> Was made, expect it tickling at your mouth!
> Then will the swarm of busy buzzing flies,
> Clouds of coincidence, break egg-shell, thrive,
> Breed, multiply, and bring you food enough. (1056-66)

The ant-eater's world which is a microcosm of Sludge's, throws that world into painful focus. Indeed the reader because of the intense realism of the descriptions views that world from the ant-eater's perspective.

Even as we examine the insect life of such poems as these, with its naturalistic description, it begins to take on a sharply heightened, acute life of its own with a new level of meaning. For Browning the insect world especially, although all animals may be included at times, becomes a microcosm of the human world above it. There is an energy to the insect life, even when it takes on sinister overtones, which Browning envies. He sees its dramatic potential for his dramatis personae, those "real" men and women of whom Santayana complained, who possess a well-masked unconscious or id. The intensity of the animal imagery, its concentration, its tactility, its complex sound holding back the smoother surface of the speaker's "song" are Browning's means of unmasking his personae. And further, this imagery depicts the world thriving underneath all of humanity's pretensions. It is not always a pleasant world--life is its keynote, however. The animal world is irrational and uninhibited, speaking to the unconscious areas of the mind that teem with unacted, unspoken thoughts and feelings. Sometimes the very control and microscopic detail in the descriptions of animals or plants indicates suppression of the unconscious; a heightened and acute perception on the part of the persona can mask fear, guilt, hatred, even madness. This psychological microcosm reaches its culmination in "Caliban Upon Setebos," "Childe Roland," and The Ring and the Book, but it is present in the many-faceted world of the dramatis personae in the other monologues and lyrics. In other poems, however, there is such an out-pouring of rich, abundant animal and plant imagery that we may see the life force acting itself out in the speaker; some of the love poems depict such fulfillment.

Although insects are used as simple metaphors of character types in poems such as "A Toccata of Galuppi's" (the butterflies who dread extinction are the fickle and gay women of bygone Venice); or as straightforward symbols as in "On the Cliff" from James Lee's Wife (the exotic cricket and butterfly symbolizing the transforming quality of a woman's love); usually Browning is reaching further in his meaning, to show man's unconscious desires and frustrations. The flies in the following couplet are the speaker's metaphor for the parasites clinging around the "ripe" woman whom he picks like a pear: "'T was quenching a dozen blue-flies thirst / When I gave its stalk a twist." A similar disapproval is indicated by this simile used to describe the gipsies in "The Flight of the Duchess" who are "Born, no doubt, like insects which breed on / The very fruit they are meant to feed on" (359-360).

At times, in the early poems, insects only contribute to the general sense of the bounty and abundance of life, and serve to create a certain atmosphere, as in "Waring," where "God's creatures crave their boon,"

> And young gnats, by tens and twelves,
> Made as if they were the throng
> That crowd around and carry aloft
> The sound they have nursed, so sweet and pure,
> Out of a myriad noises soft,
> Into a tone that can endure
> Amid the noise of a July noon . . . .

At first, in "Up At a Villa--Down In the City" the noise of insects seems to serve only to create an atmosphere of late summer abundance, much as in "Waring":

> Some think fireflies pretty, when they mix i' the
> corn and mingle,
> Or thrid the stinking hemp till the stalks of it seem
> a-tingle.
> Late August or early September, the stunning
> cicala is shrill,
> And the bees keep their tiresome whine round the
> resinous firs on the hill.

But there is a weariness in tone, an evocation of dry, parched countryside which reveals more about the speaker than about his setting. The vibrant, unceasing insect life plays on his mind, repels him, and reveals his particular inhibitions. The "Villa" fills him with boredom; the artificiality of the "City" calls to him. In "A Serenade at the

Villa" it is the absence of insect sounds and sights which conveys the atmosphere of stillness and withholding, the frustration of the would-be lover:

> Not a twinkle from the fly,
>   Not a glimmer from the worm;
> When the crickets stopped their cry,
>   When the owls forebore a term,
> You heard music; that was I.

The speaker is outside in the silent insect world, cut off from love.

Disturbing sensual and psychological suggestions are explicitly made through the insects in Browning's poems which are there for more than atmosphere, as in this stanza from "A Lover's Quarrel":

> What of a hasty word?
> Is the fleshly heart not stirred
>   By the worm's pin-prick
>   When its roots are quick?
> See the eye, by a fly's foot blurred--
>   Ear, when a straw is heard
> Scratch the brain's coat of curd!   (106-112)

Here we sense a contact, strange and uncomfortable, between the insect and the mind. Clearly the insects are more than themselves, since they have a magnified effect on the senses. Thus they are a metaphor for the "hasty word" which has results out of all proportion to its moment in time. There is no generalization here; the choice of particular words and a specific "natural object" creates the almost maddening effect on the mind and the senses. This same effect is produced in "Mesmerism" where "the wood-worm picks" and in Part II of James Lee's Wife where, like the lovers of "A Lover's Quarrel," the wife sees that ships "safe in port" can also rot and turn to dust, for "All through worms i' the wood, which crept, / Gnawed our hearts out while we slept: / That is worst" (43-45). The images in these examples are as tactile and auditory, through their consonantal sounds, as they are visual. J. Hillis Miller, discussing Hopkins, expands on the nature of Browning's language, on its physical sense, which is especially pertinent to the imagery:

> Browning, too [like Hopkins], likes words which, as they are pronounced, give a kinesthetic possession of the thing named. But Browning is most interested in the rough, solid weight of matter which all things share; consequently his onomatopoeic words are thick harsh consonants expressing the universal density of material substance.[17]

Browning's insect images certainly have density and substance.

## C: The Spider in the Rose Garden

Browning's garden, in which the rose and the spider are frequently found, is a variation of Eden. As in Eden, the two human inhabitants, the man and the woman, are nearly always present in the narratives, monologues, and lyrics on love. In Browning's Eden evil is omnipresent, almost as if the garden had been inverted and shaken up, allowing the hidden elements to become intertwined with the surface beauty and innocence. The juxtaposition between the two states, between the dream in the rose garden, and the nightmarish side of nature impinging from underneath, or, as in "Childe Roland," from the wasteland outside the garden, is a crucial and exciting one.

Throughout Browning's poetry there are frequent allusions to the garden of Eden. Eden and its inhabitants can symbolize many things: both innocent and evil. The speaker in "Women and Roses" would like to "make an Eve, be the artist that began her, / Shaped her to his mind!" In "A Woman's Last Word" the woman keeps her love in an Eden-like state by shutting her eyes to the truth, rather than killing love by dwelling on her lover's imperfections. For it was the fruit of knowledge that ended the state of innocence for the archetypal man and woman:

> Where the serpent's tooth is
>      Shun the tree--
>
> Where the apple reddens
>      Never pry--
> Lest we lose our Edens
>      Eve and I.

Such a heaven is precarious at best, a self-deception, as is Andrea del Sarto's Eden. In "Fra Lippo Lippi," by contrast, Eden is the joyful place where woman was created, and the imagery of Lippi is full of fleshly overtones.

If the spider and the rose are both inhabitants of the same garden, then Browning's Eden contains at the outset the ingredients, or at least the suggestions of both evil and innocence. These qualities are two states of man's existence, two sides of the garden necessarily existing together. How does Browning want us to think of innocence, good, experience, evil? Briefly, we must always keep in mind the ambiguities of these qualities. Innocence may only be a mask for immobility and unwillingness to act; in its more active sense it is associated with beauty and good. To plunge into experience may result in evil; another kind of evil may result from the death-in-life stasis when no action is taken. However, an exalted type of innocence may spring to life out of both experience and evil; Pompilia's innocence is of this kind.

It is too soon to attempt a definition of evil itself, as Browning depicts it in his poems. Why, we may ask, does Browning want to make us so aware of evil? He gives us part of the answer in Sordello (an answer given more completely in The Ring and the Book). For in Book the Third the poet himself breaks into the narration, from his vantage point on a canal bank in Venice. His poetry must not ignore the sordid, poverty-stricken, unhappy existence around him, with its own measure of merit; from now on "his poetry must deal with vice and ugliness as much as with virtue and beauty"[18]:

> 'T is Venice, and 't is Life--as good you sought
> To spare me the Piazza's slippery stone
> Or keep me to the unchoked canals alone,
> As hinder Life the evil with the good
> Which make up Living, rightly understood. (III, 726-730)

He adds, a few lines further on, "Beside, care-bit erased / Broken-up beauties ever took my taste / Supremely" (III,747-749): from this poem on, he will not seek to hide this taste. The concern with vice and ugliness is also part of Browning's belief in the necessity of imperfection. Man, like the artist, wants to create something unique and perfect. Paradoxically, he can only do so by loving what is imperfect, and even at times by facing what is evil in man and the universe. Even language as used by the poet must reflect these flaws and imperfections. This is not to say, as Sordello rationalized near his death, that the artist deliberately seeks out the low water mark of evil, or rests content with what is most easily acquired, or justifies his position by saying Evil is as valid as Good. It is only that they are both part of life and must be challenged as such.

Marianne Moore, whose poetry evokes the animal world even more than does Browning's, speaks of "Imaginary gardens with real toads in them." For Browning both the gardens and the creatures in them are very real in one sense. He poses a question in "Gold Hair: A Story of Pornic" (from Dramatis Personae) which describes the horror of discovering corruption in the midst of apparent innocence: "Had a spider found out the communion-cup, / Was a toad in the christening-font?" Although these images are not a symbolic equation for poetry as is Miss Moore's, they do epitomize Browning's imaginative belief that in life beauty is closely linked to ugliness and the grotesque, and that in poetry, consequently, toads, spiders, and other creatures which have acquired sinister ovetones by association cannot be kept away from the purity or beauty of a character,a place--or an image.

The spider itself was one of Browning's particular creatures, for he once kept one as a pet, living "in the jaws of a great scull [sic], whence he watched me as I wrote."[19] One of the roles the spider does play in Browning's poetry is that of guardian of the poetic muse. Swinburne uses the spider for a similar purpose in his description of Browning's poetic process, that technique of embodying his brilliant spirit in words. Swinburne argues that Browning's work is not the obscure product of a disturbed, chaotic mind, and continues,

> Now, if there is any great quality more perceptible than another in Mr. Browning's intellect it is his decisive and incisive faculty of thought, his sureness and intensity of perception, his rapid and trenchant resolution of aim. . . . He is something too much the reverse of obscure; he is too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader of a ready writer to follow with any certainty the track of an intelligence which moves with such incessant rapidity, or even to realize with what spider-like swiftness and sagacity his building spirit leaps and lightens to and fro and backward and forward as it lives along the animated line of its labour, springs from thread to thread and darts from centre to circumference of the flittering and quivering web of living thought woven from the inexhaustible stores of his perception and kindled from the inexhaustible fire of his imagination.[20]

Swinburne, with his own "breathless" prose, may be thinking primarily of Sordello (note his praise of that poem, above) but this passage comprehends Browning's overall technique, and the spider's attributes make good metaphors for the poet's qualities. In a sense, Browning is always the spider spinning out the threads of his thoughts for rhymes to catch at and let go, as the speaker says in "Two in the Campagna." Sometimes, however, the web is not luminous and revealing, but obscure. In "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," for example, the spider's web becomes a metaphor for the web woven by the complex fugue of Hugues. By analogy, somewhere behind the web is the gilded roof of the church, while behind the intricacies of the fugue which "broaden and thicken," there must be the music, the meaning of it all. Or is it only hollow, fragile illusion which exists?[21]

The spider, however, is not to be seen primarily as an aesthetic metaphor, but rather as a psychological one, representing certain character traits or fears. For the spider, more than any of the other insects, suggests that the world inhabited by these myriad creatures is in some way sinister, and mocks the upper-side of life in a sinister fashion. Hence, in "Mesmerism," the spider is given demonic and human connotations in the image:

> And the spider, to serve his ends,
>   By a sudden thread,
>   Arms and legs outspread,
> On the table's midst descends,
> Come to find, God knows what friends! (16-20)

The spider in itself is neutral; it is the speaker who projects his own fears upon it. This will be particularly evident in the spider images from The Ring and the Book. Similarly, in "An Epistle. . .of Karshish" the persona seems on the surface to be simply giving the recipe for a cure when he interjects,

> . . . there's a spider here
> Weaves no web, watches on the ledge of tombs,
> Sprinkled with mottles on an ash-grey back;
> Take five and drop them . . . . (45-48)

But Karshish's particular choice of words further reveals his preoccupation with death, after hearing about the alleged coming back to life from the tomb of one Lazarus. What could the spider, this watcher of tombs, reveal of the mystery?[22]

What of the rose garden which is invaded by the spider? How do the rose and the garden function in Browning's poetry? In contrast to the spider, the rose is generally a symbol of innocence and beauty, although sometimes of transience too. Yet in Browning's poetry it seldom holds a single symbolic significance for very long; its meaning, like the spider's, is constantly shifting in context, and the two images cross paths in some poems. The images in individual poems are a psychological invention of the *persona*; in the body of the poetry they may be read as Browning's microcosmic world, commenting on, sometimes colliding with, the world of men and women. Therefore if the spider is particularly evil, it is because the *persona* projects his own fears onto this creature. And the rose plays a similar role; its meaning varies according to the speaker's conscious or unconscious intentions.

The garden is inhabited by other flowers and insects than the rose and spider. But the rose in the garden of innocence is an operative image for Browning as it is for Eliot in *Four Quartets*. There the garden signifies Eden on one level, and the rose symbolizes in turn or simultaneously innocence, heaven, the past, the tree of life, forgetfulness and memory, immortality and transience.[23] For Browning, too, many of these meanings hold. The underlying theme most often embodied by the rose is that of life versus death, a variation of good versus evil.

In "Women and Roses" the rose and the garden are both part of a dream; this poem was written at the same time as the nightmare poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," so that the two poems make significant comments on one another in terms of the themes of innocence, experience, and transformation. In the dream, past, present, and future for the rose are analogous to the three stages of women who encircle the dreamer's rose tree. The fading rose, "loose and bleached," corresponds to women who have been preserved in art, and who exist only in memory; the blooming rose, with "cup's heart nectar-brimmed," is symbolic of the women who are alive now, whom the speaker would know by experience; the rose bud is all the beautiful women to be born, and who exist now only in the imagination. Thus we end at the beginning: "Dear rose without a thorn, / Thy bud's the babe unborn." The haunting refrain asks the dreamer's question, "I dream of a wild rose tree. / And which of the roses three / Is the dearest rose to me?" Since all is a dream, the speaker cannot capture and possess the roses which fade, embrace those which bloom, nor create a "new" beauty in the roses to come.

Two important Browning themes or questions are embodied in "Women and Roses." How can one capture and prevent the good moment from passing? And encompassing this question is the larger concern: how does one wake from the dream into reality, and is it necessary to do so? Two other poems from Men and Women where the rose is a major image help to expand and answer these questions.

In "The Statue and the Bust" the immortality, or life-after-death attribute of the rose functions ironically. The Duke and his lady, in "capturing" each other in art, believe they can make beauty permanent, even as they see the dream die in their own aging faces. They thought love, too, would be permanent, that "The rose would blow when the storm passed by." "Meantime they could profit in winter's dearth / By store of fruits that supplant the rose." But a rose unplucked withers on the stem, fades as does a woman's beauty in "Women and Roses." Fra Lippo Lippi knew this, for his world was too big to pass for a dream; he drank from his cup of bliss as it ran over.

A rose when plucked is not immortal either, as we will find in "Two In the Campagna." But in "A Pretty Woman" we find that it is better to gather the rose in all its living beauty than to try to preserve it in artistic imitation. The rose symbolizes a woman and her usefulness.

> Thus the craftsman thinks to grace the rose,--
>   Plucks a mould-flower
>   For his gold flower,
> Uses fine things that efface the rose:
>
> Rosy rubies make its cup more rose,
>   Precious metals
>   Ape the petals,--
> Last, some old king locks it up, morose!
>
> Then how grace a rose? I know a way!
>   Leave it, rather.
>   Must you gather?
> Smell, kiss, wear it--at last, throw away!

This poem is a cynical commentary, in effect, on "My Last Duchess." Better far to appreciate a rose (or a woman) in its natural state of perfection in imperfection, than to transform it by art to an object to possess and lock up, like the painting of the Duke's former Duchess.

Beauty is destroyed through fulfillment when it is used, yet its immortality lies in that fulfillment. The third way is to savour the rose's potential by leaving it blooming, untouched, to wither in its own time.

The companion poems, "One Way of Love" and "Another Way of Love," each takes the June rose as its motif. In the first, the speaker strews roses in the path where his Pauline might pass, for he is willing to risk all in unspoken love for a woman. There is irony in this poem, but its theme is not so clear as in "Another Way of Love," written from a woman's point of view. She "compares her perfections to those of June, and speaks scornfully of the man who could tire of them merely because they are always the same."[24] If such be his feeling, she can, like June, "mend her bower now, your hand left unsightly / By plucking the roses," and offer her beauty anew to someone who appreciates it:

> If June be refulgent
> With flowers in completeness,
>   All petals, no prickles,
>   Delicious as trickles
> Of wine poured at mass-time,--
>   And choose One indulgent
>   To redness and sweetness. . . . (24-30)

Her love is like the red, red rose, with its sweetness like wine, but with no thorns. The "thorns" are bared in the final stanza, in which June (the woman) will use her June-lightning to rid herself of these "insects," men, just as she would prevent spiders from spinning. In this case the spider would seem to be the victim of the rose which is not passive and powerless against marauders.

The most grotesque rose metaphor of this period occurs in "The Heretic's Tragedy,"[25] when John the heretic, as he is burned, is metamorphosed into a huge flaming rose which unfolds as his heart:

> Ha, Ha, John plucks now at his rose
> To rid himself of a sorrow at heart!
> Lo,--petal on petal, fierce rays unclose;
> Anther on anther, sharp spikes outstart;
> And with blood for dew, the bosom boils;
> And a gust of sulphur is all its smell;
> And lo, he is horribly in the toils
> Of a coal-black giant flower of hell!

This rose is the inversion of the rose out of the garden which we have seen before. The image is satanic, as it appears to the gloating cynical observers who have sent John to his fate. There are macabre puns in their use of "pluck" and "heart," in terms of the meaning of plucking a rose in other poems. In an early dramatic monologue, "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," the supposedly devout monk reveals his lack of Christian charity as he views the roses of Brother Lawrence in the light of the flames of hell:

> Oh, that rose has prior claim--
> Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?
> Hell dry you up with its flames!

In these last three examples, then, the rose has moved from the garden of innocence to the garden of experience, bringing, in a sense, the grotesque and the horrific into its sphere in more perverse forms than those associated with the toad or spider. This "underworld" of imagery will assume greater significance in the examination of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," and in The Ring and the Book. Although it does not consciously predominate in the lyrics and monologues of Browning's middle period, that darker side of man's nature and experience is often covertly present through some of the imagery.

We are seeing that although on one level nature is used by Browning to show order and design in an otherwise chaotic existence, on another plane the complex animal and plant imagery functions quite differently--to show, in fact, the chaos and complexity, the immense detail, the flux of existence. It functions, then, to mirror man's own complexities and convolutions, the irrational, rather than the rational side of his spirit.

## D: The Bee and the Flower: Imagery of Transformation

The rose and the spider are part of a larger image-cluster which includes images of transformation, initiation, experience. These images operate on a slightly different tangent to the innocence- evil images, for experience in itself is not necessarily evil, although it may be, and a state of renewed innocence sometimes arises from experience. The transformation imagery is predominantly sexual in diction and context, quite deliberately so; therefore the bee and flower image is "symbolic" of all the analogous imagery which is sexual in nature. For Browning a physical experience is often symbolic of or leads to a spiritual one just as body may symbolize or embody soul. The change involved may be an awakening from death-in-life to a total, joyful experience of living, a life-after-death. Life must be lived, which means that death must also be faced, although in the poems in this section it is most often a symbolic death. Life and creativity are pitted against death and sterility; consciousness is attained often by means of the body and in terms of the physical imagery of the poems.

The bee and flower image is well exemplified in "Women and Roses" when the speaker dreams of his union with the rose in bloom, and imagines the "now" of fulfillment:

> Deep, as drops from a statue's plinth
> The bee sucked in by the hyacinth,
> So will I bury me while burning
> Quench like him at a plunge my yearning,
> Eyes in your eyes, lips on your lips.

A similar image is used in "Popularity," as discussed earlier, but it does not evoke the strong sense of being drawn into and suffused in physical sensation that this poem is able to do. Barbara Melchiori chooses this poem, with the other dream poem, "Childe Roland," to illustrate her contention that Browning was not conscious of the desires and fears in his own nature:

> What emerges from the dream poems seems . . . to be the exact reverse of the conscious position assumed by Browning at the time of his public statements. In "Women and Roses," perhaps the most openly sexual of his poems, with the exception of those written towards the end of his life, Browning, the faithful husband, is discovered pursuing erotic dreams projected also into the past and future: dreams in which his imagination embraces statues, and where love has certainly nothing of the divine.[26]

There is no more reason to identify the dreamer with Browning than to identify any of the other personae with him, although to seek for what is subconsciously revealed in dreams is valid. Furthermore, Browning wrote many non-dream poems which were explicitly sexual in their imagery, and of which he was fully conscious. The imagery, like the personae, is part of the mask Browning deliberately created for his own thoughts and emotions. In the case of sexual imagery, to use erotic images of plants and animals would be an acceptable way to represent human sexuality for the Victorian public; it is their fears, and not Browning's, which are hidden. But even this argument is secondary to what Browning really seeks in his poetry: a representation of the union of physical and spiritual, body and soul, a union which occurs only at rare epiphanic moments.

Flowers, plants, and parts thereof, also function by themselves as sexual, sensual images in Browning's poetry. They are not always the overt male and female representations of cups, clefts, and hollows, or sharp angularity and spikes, referred to by C.H. Herford in 1905 (Robert Browning). Plants and landscapes are often used to suggest the human body, and more broadly to refer to man's psychological nature, a "landscape" of itself. We always return to the importance of the concrete and the "natural object" in poetry, for the image as Browning uses it is an embodiment of an idea or perception. (The externalization of "inner" landscapes is, of course, a characteristic of both Romantic and Victorian poetry, and continues in Lawrence's deliberate translation of erotic experience into animal and plant imagery.) If the sexual image connotes the body, then it is indeed the idea made "flesh." In miniature, such an image is an incarnation. Browning's poems which are overtly about the Incarnation also rely on multiple incarnations through imagery within each poem to convey the larger message. The body for Browning is important in human passion and divine love; like Donne he did not separate the two.

The sexual implications of the flower-bee image emerge strongly in many poems. The most striking, and central, image in the early poem "Porphyria's Lover" perverts the usual image of the shut bud being opened by giving it a new connotation:

> As a shut bud that holds a bee,
>   I warily oped her lids: again
>   Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.

Porphyria's lover, passive in his love, seems to use murder as a symbol of the act which would capture and bind his mistress to him.

He "acts out" murder by fantasizing that he has strangled the girl with her own long yellow hair. That the murder is symbolic, or only exists within his mind, is made clear by the absence of struggle, and by the laughing blue eyes when the lover peeps into them. Not only does she look "as if alive" as does the portrait of "My Last Duchess," but in fact Porphyria seems to have had her will of her lover yet again. The romantic blue eye is dangerous for a moment, has a sting in it. The simulated strangulation is a metaphor for the sexual act, but the girl is still not really under the persona's control. It should be remembered that the effect of "Porphyria's Lover" hinges on the ambiguity of the action and of the imagery too. The lover, like the Duke in "My Last Duchess," is an upholder of stasis and death-in-life existence; both in a sense are mocked by the two women.

That Porphyria's lover and the Duke in "My Last Duchess" both stultify rather than uphold life is evident in the sparsity of their imagery, which seems measured out with great self-consciousness from frustrated minds. David Shaw in The Dialectical Temper feels that the early monologues indicate the failure of the aesthetic man, as opposed to the ethical man to follow in later monologues:

> We have seen that the aesthetic man's ennui renders him highly impressionable. Without any mediating mind, his masks are like negatives on which images are permanently printed. Deprived of all the devices of the subjective poet, these early monologues avoid potential monotony and exert a strange fascination, in the manner of Robbe-Grillet's novels. The speakers see and hear, but their minds cannot judge. Though they celebrate the power of sensuous objects, the speakers cannot project significance into these objects and cannot compare one object with another, for fear of suggesting a connection that does not exist. Because nothing is altered by the observer's attitude toward objects or by his conception of them, these monologues seldom use figurative language.[27]

"The Bishop Orders His Tomb" is included under this description, because, in spite of the abundance of sensual description, the Bishop has reversed and confused the meaning of most of the imagery he uses. I would agree with Shaw's description of some of the _personae_ in this period, but not with his ultimate diagnosis. The aesthetic-ethical man is really one, in either his failures or his successes.

In "The Flower's Name," by giving a "soft meandering Spanish name" to an insignificant rock plant, the woman immortalizes the flower, in her singing voice, for her lover. Now he wills the flower to stay fixed, as the symbol of the eternal moment of his love:

> Flower, you Spaniard, look that you grow not,
>   Stay as you are and be loved for ever!
> Bud, if I kiss 't is that you blow not:
>   Mind, the shut pink mouth opens never!
> For while it pouts, her fingers wrestle,
>   Twinkling the audacious leaves between,
> Till round they turn and down they nestle--
>   Is not the dear mark still to be seen? (33-40)

The"shut pink mouth" implies the innocence of his mistress and he wishes no one else to touch her, just as she alone leaves her mark on the flower.

What Lafacadio Hearn has called the "very best we have in . . . the 'literature of kissing'"[28] occurs in "In a Gondola." The poem is a love-duet between the man and the woman. Her first song uses the image of moth and flower to declare, first, her readiness to be awakened by love:

> The Moth's kiss, first!
> Kiss me as if you made believe
> You were not sure, this eve,
> How my face, your flower, had pursed
> Its petals up; so, here and there
> You brush it, till I grow aware
> Who wants me, and wide burst. (49-55)

Then the bee-flower image expresses her total commitment to and desire for immersion in love:

> The Bee's kiss, now!
> Kiss me as if you entered gay
> My heart at some noon day,
> A bud that dares not disallow
> The claim, so all is rendered up,
> And passively its shattered cup
> Over your head to sleep I bow. (56-62)

Although the woman compares herself to the passive flower, it is a passivity, following complete and active surrender. One is never sure, in the context of the poem, if such desire is really acted upon, or merely verbalized. The man himself tends to abstract their love, to idealize it, until the end of the poem when he is stabbed and dies, while embracing the woman, with these words: "I / Have lived indeed, and so--(yet one more kiss)--can die!" (230-231) Ioan Williams suggests that the "fierceness and intensity with which this passion strives for an ultimate fulfillment, which mocks the finality of death, carries suggestions of destructiveness."[29] The wounds of love are more subtly contained in a four-line passage, not quite a haiku, in which the woman's bird fulfills the role of the bee in the previous images:

> Dear lory, may his beak retain
> Ever its delicate rose stain
> As if the wounded lotus-blossoms
> Had marked their thief to know again! (155-158)

The words are the man's and the simplicity they hold has more meaning than his more extravagant flights of fancy in the rest of the poem. The theme, on one level, is "that commitment to the truth of emotions is sufficient to overcome even death."[30]

The awakening to love and the blossoming into womanhood of someone who, like the Duke's last Duchess, is already very alive to life itself, is a major theme in "The Flight of the Duchess." This theme is sustained by two major image patterns, which have sexual overtones. The first occurs at the time of the hunt, in the passage describing the season:

> Well, early in autumn, at first winter-warning,
> When the stag had to break with his foot, of a morning,
> A drinking-hole out of the fresh tender ice
> That covered the pond till the sun, in a trice,
> Loosening it, let out a ripple of gold,
>   And another and another, and faster and faster,
> Till, dimpling to blindness, the wide water rolled . . . .
> (216-222)

Although on the surface these lines are simply descriptive and naturalistic, the mood conveyed demands a closer reading. Barbara Melchiori calls this passage the introduction to the theme of sexual awakening and loss of innocence for the Duchess.[31] This awakening may be spiritual, however, as well as physical. The sexual connotations become stronger as the Duke forces his wife to play the role of lady of the castle, as decreed by the "ancient authors":

>   "When horns wind a mort and the deer is at siege,
> Let the dame of the castle prick forth on her jennet,
>   And, with water to wash the hands of her liege
> In a clean ewer with a fair towelling,
>   Let her preside at the disembowelling." (263-267)

The ewer is a female symbol, and disembowelling has traditional associations with the sexual act, Mrs. Melchiori points out. Apart from the sadistic character of the Duke which such commands suggest, it would seem that the victim of the hunt, the deer, is at the same time a symbol for the Duchess. The ceremony of the hunt is, at least figuratively speaking, to represent a forced consummation.

It is significant that at this point the Duchess rebels, and for punishment is delivered into the hands of the old gipsy, presumably to be frightened out of her disobedience:

He was contrasting, 't was plain from his gesture,
The life of the lady so flower-like and delicate
With the loathsome squalor of this helicat. (437-439)

The Gipsies are characterized as taking the bare facts of earth, the "thing itself," and making them anew. They are described by active images, while the people of the castle are passive (except for the Duke and his mother, the latter bearing many of the animal qualities of a Goneril or a Regan). The recurrence of sexual symbolism in a conscious manner links up the earlier imagery of breaking ice. For one of the skills of the Gipsies is "imaged" in the following passage:

Glasses they'll blow you, crystal clear
Where just a faint cloud of rose shall appear,
As if in pure water you dropped and let die
A bruised black-blooded mulberry;
And that other sort, their crowning pride,
With long white threads distinct inside,
Like the lake-flower's fibrous roots which dangle
Loose such a length and never tangle,
Where the bold sword-lily cuts the clear waters
And the cup-lily crouches with all the white daughters
. . . .(375-384)

The glasses are imitations of flower qualities, which in turn symbolize the body. Browning reversed these similes in "Up At a Villa--Down In the City," where the speaker conveys the intense, quick growth characterizing summer's arrival in these words:

'Mid the sharp short emerald wheat, scarce risen
three fingers well,
The wild tulip, at end of its tube, blows out its
great red bell
Like a thin clear bubble of blood, for the children
to pick and sell.

In this condensed simile, with its clear female symbolism, the flower blows out like blood, not as glass tinted with a blood colour. A most effective image, it has been referred to by J.K. Bonnell in his discussion of Browning's touch imagery:

> In such lines as these the poet projects his own personality into the things described, so that when he says the tulip blows out its great red bell, we have a feeling of active growth rather than the mere surface appearance of the flower.[32]

Again, we have the heightened, acute awareness of the speaker, signifying his state of mind, disturbed by the quickening of life around him.

The imagery of "sword-lily" and"cup-lily" in the passage from "The Flight of the Duchess" carries out the theme of sexual awakening. The implication of submission of female to male is couched in less violent and more natural imagery than the rules cited by the Duke, above, to be followed by his Duchess. The remainder of the poem, with abundant imagery of wealth, nature,and the body, is concerned with tracing the Duchess's full awakening to life through the verbal and visual "seduction" by the old Gipsy, who, during her chanting, is metamorphosed into a beautiful woman.[33] She infuses the Duchess with the life process as she teaches her about earth, love, and creativity, so that the Duchess receives "--Life's pure fire" into her heart and breast, "her very hair" moves "to the mystic measure, / Bounding as the bosom bounded." (Hair is frequently used in Browning's imagery in its traditional way to indicate sexuality.)[34] The awakening is more than sexual, for the Duchess is gradually being unified with existence, a complex, lifetime process.

The relationship between Gipsy and Duchess is ambiguous as one is described as the tree and the other as the plant supported by the tree; the two may grow into one. In an abstract sense, innocence has merged with experience. Is the Duchess to be the stronger nature?

"Shall some one deck thee, over and down
  Up and about, with blossoms and leaves?
Fix his heart's fruit for the garland-crown,
  Cling with his soul as the gourd-vine cleaves,
Die on thy boughs and disappear
While not a leaf of thine is sere?" (636-641)

This is more than a metaphor; it is a natural metamorphosis. The sexual imagery here suggests that the Duchess may dominate the man in a relationship (in contrast to her subjugation to the Duke), may become the devouring female, upon whom the male is dependent and eventually dies. The Gipsy adds, however, that the opposite situation may as easily prove true. (Browning was writing this poem during his courtship of Elizabeth Barrett, and Barbara Melchiori discusses the imagery in the light of the, as yet, unformed nature of their relationship.)[35]

The Duchess is from this moment of encounter transformed, and will be free now to flee with the Gipsies and partake of life's "feast." Then at her death, in the future,

. . . a gleam
  Of yet another morning breaks,
And like the hand which ends a dream,
Death, with the might of his sunbeam,
  Touches the flesh and the soul awakes,
Then - - -" (684-689)

Here the words end, and the Gipsy's voice becomes pure music, no longer speech. Thus we are not shown beyond this life. However, the poem has already given us a long glimpse. Life proves to be a dream, and when the flesh dies the soul wakes into death, and also from death. But, paradoxically, only by refusing to let life "pass for a dream" by finding its meaning through total immersion in it, is it possible to pass from the feast of the flesh to the awakening of the soul. The two are interdependent, and life is a gradual progress towards unification. So that the gentle awakening which is described in the passage on the deer, and the sun breaking the ice to free the frozen waters, is symbolic of, and necessary to, this final awakening by Death with "his sunbeam." The message, given in "pagan" terms by the Gipsy, is a recurring theme in Browning's religious monologues which are overtly Christian in context.

## E: The Campagna and the Mountain: Two Love Poems

In the preceding section it may be seen that sexual imagery is not simply isolated or decorative, but is integral to the whole effect and meaning of the poem. There are two major love poems, one a dramatic lyric, the other closer to a dramatic monologue but with lyrical qualities, which use animal and plant imagery in explicitly sensual contexts, to convey two diverse attitudes and resolutions to life and love. "Two In the Campagna" and "By the Fire-side" were both published in 1855 in Men and Women, and are therefore examples of Browning's consummate control over the shorter poem in his middle period. The two poems both have imagery which justifies their inclusion in the preceding two sections of this chapter, but they are important enough to be singled out for separate readings.

The most perfect representation, by an image, of the failure of the "good moment" to become the "infinite moment" occurs in "Two In the Campagna." Man's finiteness and the barrier between anticipation and realization are epitomized in the lines,

--I pluck the rose
And love it more than tongue can speak--
Then the good minute goes.

The minute of love, physically represented by the image of plucking a rose, is a silent one, where words cannot convey the love contained. However, a barrier is still present which makes the moment fleeting and not fulfilling. Whether the barrier is the fault of the woman or the man (who is the speaker) is difficult to ascertain. Or is the barrier the one inherent between thought or feeling and *words* which was of such concern to the poet *Sordello*?

The opening of "Two In the Campagna," which puts us *in medias res*, paradoxically succeeds in linking the parts, the images, of the poem together, but fails to unite the thoughts of the speaker:

For me, I touched a thought, I know,
  Has tantalized me many times,
(Like turns of thread the spiders throw
  Mocking across our path) for rhymes
To catch at and let go.

The image of the spider recalls Whitman's similar image in "A noiseless patient spider."[36] Browning's poem, like Whitman's, is on one level about poetic process. The very process becomes the theme, one which occurs overtly or indirectly in numerous poems, as has already been seen. Like the spider's web which attaches onto objects in the campagna, the thought of the lover moves elusively and randomly from one point to the next. He can never see the whole thread at once, and the sudden change of mood from stanza to stanza indicates how difficult he finds it to clothe his thoughts in language. In the poem itself, however, a pattern of imagery and rhythm has been set which *does* create a unity of image and idea.

The speaker, then, is a highly conscious persona who is desperately trying to articulate a situation. He extends the metaphor of the spider's web over the next two stanzas:

> Help me to hold it! First it left
>   The yellowing fennel, run to seed
> There, branching from the brickwork's cleft,
>   Some old tomb's ruin: yonder weed
> Took up the floating weft,

as the thread, like the mind of the lover, is caught onto by nature's weeds and man's ruins. (The setting has analogies with the one in "Love Among the Ruins.") The focus becomes concentrated on the weed itself,

> Where one small orange cup amassed
>   Five beetles,—blind and green they grope
> Among the honey-meal: and last,
>   Everywhere on the grassy slope
> I traced it. Hold it fast!

This highly particularized image shows in microscopic detail the "thing itself." The desire for sensation is a groping quest "Among the honey-meal," carried out by five blind beetles on the female flower with its "small orange cup." The image, recalling the blind beetle of "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis,"implies that the lover's quest is blind and groping too. It "means" the intense effort, either physical or logical, to make the physical moment meaningful. The speaker wants the thread "fixed" so that he will have time to understand the meaning. The fulfilled quest and landscape of "By the Fire-side" provides an answer.

The speaker now begins to follow the thoughts about his love in the same intense,but stream-of-consciousness, fashion. Against the campagna of Rome, where "nature has her way"with her "primal naked forms of flowers," the speaker begins the arduous task of defining where the love has failed. Surely in such a setting love should have come spontaneously and unconsciously. The poem seems to describe a seduction in retrospect, so that perhaps like Donne's "The Extasie" there is the same ironic interplay between body and soul. Here, although the critical moment is planned for and then seized, by the next stanza the man is already asking, "Where does the fault lie?" Unlike the woman of "In a Gondola" who asks that her lover break down the partition wall between them, the woman spoken to in this poem, is not "all" to her lover, but rather, "just so much, no more." The man seeks to drink his fill at her soul's springs, but the unspoken answer comes,

> No. I yearn upward, touch you close,
>   Then stand away. I kiss your cheek,
> Catch your soul's warmth,--I pluck the rose
>   And love it more than tongue can speak--
> Then the good minute goes.

The present immediately becomes the past; the speaker is already far "Out of that minute," as he laments,

>                     Must I go
> Still like the thistle-ball, no bar
>   Onward, whenever light winds blow,
> Fixed by no friendly star?

His self-image is of an unrooted, rolling plant, which links with the image of the groping beetles. He has wanted the woman to be his fixed star, giving direction to his life. In looking beyond the present he has failed to grasp its very significance. The clue to the flaw is in the imagery which seems to separate soul and sense, and in the very articulation of the moment which the speaker attempts. He consciously dwells on self; it is he who is to conceptualize the experience, immortalize the moment in words.

The predicament embodied in the poem is not unique; if man wants complete knowledge, unending love, perfect art, he is bound to disappointment. He must learn to enjoy the incomplete, imperfect moments of time. These are recurring variations on a central theme throughout Browning's poetry. In "Two In the Campagna" the thread of thought, the spider's thread, is picked up in the last stanza, only to be lost again:

> Just when I seemed about to learn!
>   Where is the thread now? Off again!
> The old trick! Only I discern--
>   Infinite passion, and the pain
> Of finite hearts that yearn.

The thread, the thought, has neither an end nor a logic. In the realization of man's situation, the speaker immortalizes the unfulfillment of his own love in the final two lines. We are able to comprehend "Infinite passion, and the pain / Of finite hearts that yearn" because of the pattern of imagery of which these lines are the necessary conclusion. An otherwise abstract image is given concrete meaning through a total reading of the poem.[37]

William Whitla summarizes the meaning of "Two In the Campagna" as follows: "The lover strives to hold fast to the love that motivates him, but the barrier of the two selves seems to interrupt the insight that should be shared."[38] The lovers share the yearning, but the sense of self prevents the moment of union. "The love which comes from incarnational individuality gives all, gives up all, and forgives all."[39] Whitla means that in perfect union of human beings the moment becomes eternity, and this union is analogous with the union of human and divine in the Incarnation. But it is analogous, too, with the oneness of image and idea. An action of the self is required, and we are reminded of Hopkins' creative concepts of "selving" and "individuation." The rose image represents the nearest approach to the infinite moment, yet it really symbolizes the transience both of life and human passion. But the other images are either too analytical for love, as in the beetle "cluster," or too abstract, as in the "friendly star." The good moment is not given the physical reality of "In a Gondola," yet the moment in that poem ended in death. Can the good moment become infinite and still allow a continuance of life? "By the Fire-side" will provide another aspect of the answer.

To approach "By the Fire-side" it is useful to examine first an earlier poem, "The Englishman in Italy," in which the same kind of sexual imagery, using landscape and plants as body, is used abundantly for the imagery's own effect and to create an atmosphere. The dramatic situation and persona seem secondary in this poem to the wealth of lavish imagery. In both poems we move through expanses of Italian landscape, the setting for many of Browning's poems. The rich detail of natural imagery accumulates to form total pictures and moods. In "By the Fire-side" the imagery is directed, however, while in "The Englishman in Italy" a sense of randomness pervades. In both poems the particularizing in Browning's use of plants and animals makes the images come to mean something more than themselves, just as in the insect imagery mentioned earlier.

"The Englishman in Italy" is really a love poem directed towards a country landscape, rather than to the young Italian girl who is addressed by the persona. Its drama lies not in character revelation but in the mood of the Italian countryside at the end of summer, when nature is dry and fruitful and expectant:

> Time for rain! for your long hot dry Autumn
>   Had net-worked with brown
> The white skin of each grape on the bunches,
>   Marked like a quail's crown,
> Those creatures you make such account of,
>   Whose heads--speckled white
> Over brown like a great spider's back,
>   As I told you last night,--
> Your mother bites off for her supper. (13-21)

The explicit detail which the poet's eye sees evokes all the senses; we see, taste, and touch. The poem is seductive on a secondary level; one does begin to feel that the audience (the young girl) governs the speaker's choice of such images as,

>   Red-ripe as could be,
> Pomegranates were chapping and splitting
>   In halves on the tree. . . . (22-24)

Here the fruit is almost personified as it suggests red cheeks or lips. (Pomegranates were a favourite symbolic fruit for Browning.)[40] Everything is ripened and ready to be savoured. The next figurative passage, a variant of which appears in "Two in the Campagna," is one of Browning's structural images, with substance, texture, and body to it:

> And betwixt the loose walls of great flintstone,
>   Or in the thick dust
> On the path, or straight out of the rock-side,
>   Wherever could thrust
> Some burnt sprig of bold hardy rock-flower
>   Its yellow face up,
> For the prize were great butterflies fighting,
>   Some five for one cup. (25-32)

These images, rather than revealing the speaker's character as did the beetle-weed image in "Two in the Campagna," suggest nature's abundance and sensuality. The various fruits of harvest are described, such as

> . . . pink and grey jellies, your sea-fruit
> You touch the strange lumps,
> And mouths gape there, eyes open all manner
> Of horns and of humps . . . . (57-60)[41]

The images continue: blood-like juice which is squeezed from the grape, "the love apple," "pulpy and red,"or the "gourds fried in great purple slices, / That colour of popes." The language and metaphor become increasingly rich and sensuous, and more clearly connotative of the human body.

The culmination of the imagery depicting fruitful and bountiful nature occurs in these lines:

> Meantime, see the grape bunch they've brought you:
> The rain-water slips
> O'er the heavy blue bloom of each globe
> Which the wasp to your lips
> Still follows with fretful persistence:
> Nay, taste, while awake,
> This half of a curd-white smooth cheese-ball
> That peels, flake by flake,
> Like an onion, each smoother and whiter;
> Next, sip this weak wine
> From the thin green glass flask, with its stopper,
> A leaf of the vine;
> And end with the prickly-pear's red flesh
> That leaves thro' its juice
> The stony black seeds on your pearl-teeth. (101-115)[42]

(Although the significance of this feast does not extend beyond the moment, it is preparation for the imagery of food which runs a pattern through The Ring and the Book.) The love offering (although the *personae* are not so deeply or clearly presented) is as seductive as the midnight feast of "The Eve of St. Agnes," even if Browning's setting is in bright Italian sunlight. In symbolic terms a feast from nature, particularized with such bodily attributes as "red flesh" and "curd-white smooth" (as skin) obviously affirms, and identifies as one, the sensual appeal of man *and* nature. There is a variation, too, of the bee-flower image cluster, in the image of the wasp which follows the grape's "globe" to the young girl's lips. When she eats the grapes it is a much more erotic act than when her mother does (see lines thirteen to twenty-one, quoted above).

Suddenly, at the height of the sexual imagery, to climax and dispel the tension, the storm breaks:

> Scirocco is loose!
> Hark, the quick whistling pelt of the olives
> Which, thick in one's track,
> Tempt the stranger to pick up and bite them,
> Tho' not yet half black!
> How the old twisted olive trunks shudder,
> The medlars let fall
> Their hard fruit, and the brittle great fig-trees
> Snap off, figs and all,
> For here comes the whole of the tempest! (116-125)

The poet has taken us from the close contemplation of a girl eating grapes to the broader scene of nature's bounty and force. Now he recalls the feast imagery on a lower, but still explicit, level. We come, now,

> . . . to feast on the myrtles
> That offered, each side,
> Their fruit-balls, black, glossy and luscious,—
> Or strip from the sorbs
> A treasure, or, rosy and wondrous,
> Those hairy gold orbs! (136-140)

The wooing is obliquely conducted in the male-female images of summer and fruition. The ending of "The Englishman in Italy" is parallel to similar passages in "By the Fire-side," to which we now turn.

Some of the most effective and deliberate passages of sexual imagery involving plants and landscape occur in "By the Fire-side." Their use, in the dramatic framework of the poem, makes it one of Browning's most important expressions of the good moment merging with the infinite moment. Like so many of Browning's poems more overtly about poetic process, this poem too makes its message out of process, out of the image patterns themselves. In a sense, one could say that "The Englishman in Italy" contained its statement in its image patterns; the love for that country is manifest in and explained by the Italian richness of landscape. The emphasis on the particular, whether a fruit, or a pearly tooth, is again the poet's way of dealing with infinite variety. But Browning does more than re-create a sensual and erotic landscape in "By the Fire-side"; he recalls a crucial moment of his persona's existence, a moment which in part at least is symbolic of a similar transforming moment in his own life. Thus, in this poem, Browning comes near to achieving the perfect union of dramatic moment, characterization, and imagery.

What is the context for the passages which we want to examine in detail? The narrator imagines himself in his life's autumn (still to come) recalling the moment which gave meaning to all his life. (As the poem begins, this moment is in the very immediate past, and Browning displays his skilful use of time and the sense of regression.) The man will take a journey of the mind into the past, and as time future and time past become time present, the imagined journey will become a conscious quest for that one moment which focusses the past, gives meaning to the present, and orders the future. The landscape which the narrator recalls evokes the psychological and physical moment of perfect union. From the vistas of Italy, that "woman-country" wooed and loved by "earth's male-lands," with the tower, mill, and iron forge, and the ruined chapel in the distance (all vestiges of civilization) the panorama narrows suddenly until, "A turn, and we stand in the heart of things." Everything becomes immediate, crowding in on the man and woman. The thread of trickling water functions more effectively for these personae, as a link between disconnected thoughts, than does the spider's web of "Two In the Campagna."

The path which must be taken in "By the Fire-side" is a narrow one between the gorge and the "straight-up rock," and is kept,

> By boulder-stones where lichens mock
>   The marks on a moth, and small ferns fit
> Their teeth to the polished block. (48-50)

The path bears a resemblance to the path into an even wilder landscape in "The Englishman in Italy":

> Though the wild path grew wilder each instant,
>   And place was e'en grudged
>   'Mid the rock-chasms and piles of loose stones
>   Like loose broken teeth
> Of some monster which climbed there to die
>   From the ocean beneath--
> Place was grudged to the silver-grey fume-weed
>   That clung to the path,
> And dark rosemary ever a-dying. . . . (151-159)

And the landscapes of both poems, in their grotesqueness as well as their beauty, also have echoes in passages from "Karshish" and "Childe Roland." Browning uses sexual imagery of plants along the paths with great deliberation. In the most striking passages, animals, plants, and rocks all interchange features and are transformations of one another as well as of the human body.

Moving closer to the heart of the poem, then, in the central imagistic passage we find parallels with imagery noted from other poems:

> Oh the sense of the yellow mountain-flowers,
>   And thorny balls, each three in one,
> The chestnuts throw on our path in showers:
>   For the drop of the woodland fruit's begun
> These early November hours,

That crimson the creeper's leaf across
  Like a splash of blood, intense, abrupt,
O'er a shield else gold from rim to boss,
  And lay it for show on the fairy-cupped
Elf-needled mat of moss,

By the rose-flesh mushrooms, undivulged
  Last evening--nay, in to-day's first dew
Yon sudden coral nipple bulged,
  Where a freaked fawn-coloured flaky crew
Of toadstools peep indulged. (51-65)

The images flow out in a continuous line, for there is no break throughout the three stanzas. However rich and complex the imagery and syntax, there is none of the obscurity for which Browning was often criticized. The poetry is, rather, extremely particularized, and the natural descriptions are so acute as to mean something about the speaker's life. In his eyes, then, the approaching moment of fulfillment is matched by the landscape which is sensual, fruitful, and violent. Here, too, is a culmination of the various natural images and landscapes, particularly sexual, that have been referred to previously. The same sense of life which the Duchess escaped to find, and which characterizes the setting of "The Englishman in Italy" works specifically here to bring about the moment of love. The fruition of autumn, occurring almost overnight, lays itself out before the eye; the images suggest a woman's body showing itself naturally and in a state of expectancy.

The knowledge that the perfect moment is imminent comes, for the man and woman, as they cross the bridge after having examined the chapel, with its primitive fresco depicting "John in the Desert":

Oh moment, one and infinite!
  The water slips o'er stock and stone;
The West is tender, hardly bright:
  How grey at once is the evening grown--
One star, the chrysolite! (181-185)

In the midst of the silent woods where other scenes have been enacted occurs the infinitesimal,infinite moment, which, if taken will prove life, if lost will be lost forever.[43] It means the difference between contentment and bliss, being friends and being lovers. Both man and woman must be wholly conscious of the moment. The man could not touch the "last leaf," he tells us, for it must fall of its own accord. The moment cannot be forced, but rather, the silent speaking word removes the barrier of the "fleshly screen" coming between lovers as in "The Last Ride Together" and"Two In the Campagna." Leaving a leaf (of restraint) to fall of its own accord is quite different from plucking the rose, seizing the good moment (see Stanza XLI).

Yet ultimately a sense of irony pervades this poem, too. The immortality of the moment is in part dependent on the memory of the two concerned, and on the man's articulation of what the moment has meant and will mean in years to come. He was silent when it mattered, and re-createsthe moment now, rather than analyzing it as did the speaker of "Two In the Campagna." (Nor does he have to die, dramatically, to immortalize the good moment, as did the lover of "In a Gondola.") Also the man and woman in "By the Fire-side" display greater loss of self and lack of self-consciousness than the personae of the other poems. The dramatic situation coupled with the vibrant sexual imagery which is the "landmark" of that good moment makes this poem most nearly a realization of fulfilled love.

William Whitla calls the event in "By the Fire-side" the "perfect integration of the good minute," the life of significant love which has become for the speaker his "mode of knowledge," motivating his actions and ennobling his being.[44] In a physical sense, and in time, the moment is only a moment, for immediately afterwards the feeling of suspension and of unity with nature disappears:

A moment after, and hands unseen
  Were hanging the night around us fast;
But we knew that a bar was broken between
  Life and life; we were mixed at last
In spite of the mortal screen. (231-235)

The couple are still separated physically, but there is no longer a barrier between their souls. This union of souls, however, was first dependent on their recognition of body in nature and in themselves. For Browning feels that the soul is consciousness attained through the body, and that such consciousness would be even more necessary for the union of two people.

For a moment, then, the "infinite passion" has been recognized:

The forests had done it; there they stood;
  We caught for a moment the powers at play;
They had mingled us so, for once and good,
  Their work was done--we might go or stay,
They relapsed to their ancient mood. (236-240)

This stanza, because it shows the feasibility for the ultimate intermingling of man and nature, and the effect nature can have on man, is a key to more than this one poem. We have learned that the worlds of man and nature do sometimes meet, intersect, and become part of one another, even as do the two human beings in the landscape. The anthropomorphic description of the forests is paralleled in "The Englishman in Italy" where the mountains contribute to the sense of unity:

Oh, those mountains, their infinite movement!
  Still moving with you;
For, ever some new head and breast of them
  Thrusts into view
To observe the intruder; you see it
  If quickly they escape you surprise them. (181-187)

Yet the mountains are more threatening and removed from the speaker than are the forests in "By the Fire-side": they are like the mountains which threaten the protagonist of "Childe Roland." In all three poems the sense of a living continuum, instinct with energy, is retained.

The ability of the man and woman to act, silently and without self-consciousness, at the propitious moment, has made it infinite in its influence on the remainder of their lives, for "a soul declares itself . . . by its fruit, the thing it does."[45] Geoffrey Hartman relates the moment to the artistic form in Browning's poetry by saying (referring also to Hopkins),

> Whether or not the religious cause is fundamental, each poet introduces a new density of diction and structure into the lyric. Browning does it primarily by the dramatic method, by speaking through characters caught in a moment which is the equivalent of the fruitful or characteristic moment prescribed for the visual arts.[46]

Within the poem the fruitful or infinite moment is achieved through the unity of imagery and thought. It is the moment of atonement or incarnation which parallels the oneness of the two travellers through the Italian landscape.

## F: God in Nature: Imagery in the Religious Monologues

In the religious monologues which, like "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto," have more fully developed arguments, the same image patterns function as in the shorter poems. They support the central themes, but also exist as images too--that is, they contain idea _in_ image, as Pound would say.

In "Saul," "An Epistle . . . of Karshish," "Cleon," and

"Caliban Upon Setebos," Browning presents four diverse, but not uncomplementary views of God's role in creating man and the universe; and, in the first three, the embodiment of God in Christ in the Incarnation. The natural imagery in these poems is as appropriate to each persona, in quantity, type, and particular emphasis, as in any other of Browning's poems from this period. One sees the beast in man abstracted and transcended in "Saul," recognized and nearly admitted in "Karshish," totally sublimated in "Cleon," and wallowed in, in "Caliban Upon Setebos." The ability, or lack of it, to see one's real self, seems to be closely aligned with the ability to recognize God's love.[47]

Imagery in "Saul" is mainly mood-inducing, until the crucial stanza in which an epiphany occurs and nature mirrors the prophecy of David that Love enters creation with Christ's "new law." The images do not stand independently as do the more sparing figures of speech in the other religious monologues. However, this part-narrative, part-soliloquy, influenced by Christopher Smart as well as the Bible, is worth examining for its treatment of nature and the Incarnation, and as a hymn to all creation.[48]

David, who becomes more central to the poem than Saul, is described by Abner in imagery which is nearly Pre-Raphaelite:

> "Yet now my heart leaps, O beloved! God's
>     child with his dew
> "On thy gracious gold hair, and those lilies still
>     living and blue
> "Just broken to twine round thy harp-strings, as
>     if no wild heat
> "Were now raging to torture the desert!" (11-14)

We can see the wasteland theme of the poem, with its desert and its sick king, although it is not fully developed. The poem is ostensibly about Saul, but it is David who is the active one in the drama, especially in the second half. In the section first written, there is a partially understood interplay between the king and the shepherd boy who tries to arouse Saul with music and tempting words. The king, in his passive agony, is first seen as a "king-serpent," hanging on his tent-pole in a position of crucifixion, awaiting his deliverance in the spring. At a later juncture in the poem, Saul is shown partly risen out of his lethargy, out of his brute state, and it is David who is in the passive position:

> Then first I was 'ware
> That he sat, as I say, with my head just above
> his vast knees
> Which were thrust out on each side around me,
> like oak-roots which please
> To encircle a lamb when it slumbers. (222-225)

The imagery here prefigures Christian symbolism of the lamb of God.[49]

The nine stanzas which open "Saul" were written for Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, published in 1845. They have a richness and abundance of natural imagery, because they in large part are descriptions (not in monologue form) of the songs David played and sang for the aging king. David enjoys an almost hedonistic affinity with nature, as the following lines illustrate:

> Oh, the wild joys of living! the leaping
> from rock up to rock
> The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree, the
> cool silver shock
> Of the plunge in a pool's living water, the
> hunt of the bear
> And the sultriness showing the lion is couched in
> his lair.
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit
> to employ
> All the heart and the soul and the senses
> forever in joy! (70-79)

David sings of the purely instinctual and sensual pleasures here.

These stanzas of natural description bear a similarity to the passages describing landscape which were quoted from "The Englishman in Italy." Both poems have no fully developed dramatic structure, although there is drama in the very images themselves, and in the joy in life they convey.

Although the rhythm remains the same in the part of "Saul" added for publication in Men and Women (1855), the structure becomes much more argumentative as David rhetorically develops "proofs" for the existence of God:

> Do I task any faculty highest, to image success?
> I but open my eyes,--and perfection, no more
>     and no less,
> In the kind I imagined, full-fronts me, and God
>     is seen God
> In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and
>     the clod.     (247-250)

David arrives at his perception of God's perfection without the internal struggle of some of Browning's more fully developed *personae*. God's design is seen in everything, from the humblest finite object to the soul itself.

What finally gives David his clinching argument is his sudden vision of a God who proves He is also All-Loving by becoming mortal. This prophecy of the Incarnation is believable if we take its conception to be Browning's at this stage of his life, but perhaps it is too complex to come from the shepherd-poet. David, who is neither a sceptical scientist like Karshish, nor a cultured rationalist like Cleon, is the most likely of the three, however, to have such a vision and to accept it with no doubts.[50] The language he uses is still sensual, and his proof is the proof of the senses, of the Word actually made flesh:

> 'T is the weakness in strength, that I cry for!
>     my flesh that I seek
> In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul,
>     it shall be
> A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man
>     like to me,
> Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever:
>     A Hand like this hand
> Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee!
>     See the Christ stand! (308-312)[51]

Here, then, is the completion in an infinite moment, Incarnation, of man's perfect animal state, the answer to the division between body and soul. David almost wills this revelation as he sees it as the psychological answer to Saul's dilemma. For Browning, the Word embodied in Christ is Love, with its implications of grace, forgiveness, a new innocence after a terrible experience, immortality in the body. The new life which will be Saul's if this gift is given is the equivalent of the life-force, Eros, taking over from the now dominant death-wish. Death and night will give way to life and "dayspring," and Saul will be bid awake "From the dream, the probation, the prelude" (281) into eternal life, both after death and in this world. Although more explicitly Christian, the message is much like that of the old Gipsy in "The Flight of the Duchess."

The sudden knowledge which comes intuitively to David that God will bring love to earth through Christ produces a kind of vertigo, as if the world were turning at the point of commitment, of total self-immersion. In the final stanza there is a return to the live imagery of the earlier sections, together with a return to greater symbolic suggestiveness. The beasts and birds are all stiff with terror and awe, yet the moment is also one of ecstasy:

In the shuddering forests' held breath; in the
 sudden wind-thrills;
In the startled wild beasts that bore off, each with
 eye sidling still
Though averted with wonder and dread; in the
 birds stiff and chill
That rose heavily, as I approached them, made
 stupid with awe:
E'en the serpent that slid away silent,--he felt the
 new law.
The same stared in the white humid faces upturned
 by the flowers;
The same worked in the heart of the cedar and
 moved the vine-bowers:
And the little brooks witnessing murmured, persistent
 and low,
With their obstinate, all but hushed voices--"E'en so,
 it is so!" (327-335)

At an epiphanic moment created by human love and oneness in "By the Fire-side" there was a similar stillness and timelessness in the forest before the moment passed. This treatment of nature is not simply a use of pathetic fallacy, however: Browning believes strongly that nature is more than an extension of man's feelings, and actually may contribute to bring about those very feelings. This is evident in "Childe Roland," for example, even though the protagonist projects much of himself into the landscape. Here, the serpent recalls us to the description of Saul as "king-serpent," waiting for deliverance in the spring. The serpent, often associated with evil and knowledge, in this case is more closely linked with healing. Indeed, in "Artemis Prologizes" Browning has Artemis greet Asclepios, the healer, as "Divine presenter of the healing rod, / Thy snake, with ardent throat and lulling eye, / Twines his lithe spires around!" (113-116). Saul is only partly resurrected; we do not see the effect of the "new law" on him. His body must be rejuvenated, rid of its old skin, and simultaneously his soul will be reborn. If he chooses life over death with his heart, then his body will heal and he will be alive to physical sensation. So that body and soul again emerge as inseparable. The poem ends, however, with the quiet revelation of David's God of Love.[52]

The progression in time between "Saul" and "An Epistle. . . of Karshish" creates a completely new point of view. The David of the poem creates his mystic vision with unexplained foresight, but Karshish writes after the event, the Incarnation, which David has foretold. The manipulation of time is more complex in the second poem, for time is regressive and the event is not viewed directly, either through personal experience or vision. Karshish hears, in his foreign journeyings in the pursuit of medical knowledge, of the supposed raising of Lazarus from the dead. He also meets Lazarus in person and asks a scientist's questions of him. However, he learns only by hearsay of the strange man who has given Lazarus his second life. Karshish retells his experiences to Abib, his master, and we in turn read the epistle/poem. This makes the reader fifth in line to hear of the "fact." Art in such circumstances indeed must tell the truth obliquely. Each retelling has changed the tale somewhat, and certainly Karshish's letter reveals the language and perspective of a questioning, but open-minded, man of science.

Imagery of the body naturally fills Karshish's epistle as he expresses a fascination with the physical side of man--and nature. When he comes to reveal the heart of the matter, he blushes to confess "What set me off a-writing first of all / An itch I had, a sting to write, a tang!" (66-67). There are frequent allusions to the flesh, such as "man's flesh" and "As saffron tingeth flesh, blood, bones and all!" (106) for Karshish is a doctor whom we expect to couch his tale in medical terms. Before Lazarus is mentioned, Karshish drops many clues that something is troubling him beyond cures for scalp-disease and leprosy. He betrays himself by over-speaking, and later by protesting too much. One of his cures for "falling-sickness" is given in the following "prescription":

> . . . there's a spider here
> Weaves no web, watches on the ledge of tombs,
> Sprinkled with mottles on an ash-grey back;
> Take five and drop them . . . but who knows his mind,
> The Syrian runagate I trust this to? (45-49)

Here he breaks off, protesting that the cure is secret. Yet the image of the spider, watcher of tombs, suggests that something more than a cure is involved. (We, of course, examined this image in the section on spiders, above.) Lazarus will rise from the tomb, and his "thread" with the surface reality of this world will have been broken.

In his journeying towards Jerusalem Karshish receives an omen or portent in the threat to his own life by a lynx. As portrayed, the lynx symbolizes the potential for lust and destruction in the animal man as well:

> A black lynx snarled and pricked a tufted ear;
> Lust of my blood inflamed his yellow balls:
> I cried and threw my staff and he was gone. (29-31)

This image has far greater dramatic and psychological significance than "the lion . . . couched in his lair" described in "Saul." Park Honan, in his study of Browning's characters, interprets these lines as follows:

> Karshish relates that he has defeated the lynx in quick combat, crying and throwing his stick; the lynx has met its equal, for its own "lust" and "yellow balls" symbolically reflect the passionate intensity of Karshish himself.[53]

Karshish indeed recognizes the animal in himself; the imagery and diction is deliberately sexual in connotation and the difficult consonant sounds connote the frustration of the animal's potential. But I would emphasize the threat the lynx offers to Karshish, and the fear with which the physician reacts. This becomes doubly meaningful when he also disperses, mentally, the threat of God embodied on earth, which the presence of Lazarus' body brought back to life by Christ seems to mean. Ironically, the man of medicine whose language is of the flesh fears the unknown powers of the body.[54]

Karshish comes face to face with the reborn Lazarus in a surrealist setting, where the mottled spider's back is metamorphosed into the moon's face:

> I met him thus--
> I crossed a ridge of short sharp broken hills
> Like an old lion's teeth. Out there came
> A moon made like a face with certain spots
> Multiform, manifold, and menacing. . . . (290-294)

In addition to the anthropomorphic qualities of the landscape,("imaged" similarly in "The Englishman in Italy") the menacing wild animal of Karshish's previous encounter is recalled to him by the appearance of the hills. Similar images are used with even greater psychological force in "Childe Roland." But they are equally appropriate to Lazarus, that figure who has seen the infinite, and who is forever halfway between life and death. In terms of Browning's philosophy it is significant that he chooses Karshish as his persona and not Lazarus. Lazarus has seen and can only be silent about his perfect knowledge; the Absolute, the Perfect cannot be communicated.[55] Nor can he any longer look at life from this side of the grave. He is able to see the difference between what is real and important and what is unreal and of passing significance.

Karshish, by contrast, has the exploring, doubting mind which sees truth in fragments, in parts of the whole. He doubts the Nazarene, the "learned leech" who cured Lazarus, and he calls Lazarus "mad" and a "beast." Yet, doubting his own doubts, he sees that Lazarus' tale may not qualify him as crazy and apathetic:

> Contrariwise, he loves both old and young,
> Able and weak, affects the very brutes
> And birds--how say I?flowers of the field--
> As a wise workman recognizes tools
> In a master's workshop, loving what they make.
> (227-231)

Karshish finally admits, apologetically, to Abib (and himself) that,

> This man so cured, regards the curer, then,
> As--God forgive me! who but God himself,
> Creator and sustainer of the world,
> That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile! (267-270)

Karshish's simple and homely description of the Incarnation is more dramatically true to his character than David's vision is to his. The physician breaks off these speculations to ask,

> Why write of trivial matters, things of price
> Calling at every moment for remark?
> I noticed on the margin of a pool
> Blue-flowering borage, the Aleppo sort,
> Aboundeth, very nitrous. It is strange!(278-282)

The scientific analysis of a flower is not strange; what is strange to Karshish is the thought, always present in his mind, of Lazarus who seems to enter into the "flowers of the field." Karshish is deliberately ambiguous atthis juncture. It is only in the next to last section of the letter that Karshish describes his strange meeting with Lazarus, then begs pardon for wasting Abib's time. Yet a postscript, unbidden, is attached to the letter, revealing Karshish's personal need to believe:

> The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
> So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too--
> So, through the thunder comes a human voice
> Saying, "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
> Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
> Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine,
> But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
> And thou must love me who have died for thee!"
> The madman saith He said so: it is strange.
> (304-312)

Karshish's "vision" makes the Word of God sound very much like the physician's own language. Again, as in "Saul," the emphasis is on God's fleshly presence, on hands, heart, and face.

Karshish, in the first century A. D., has doubts like those of Browning's contemporaries in the nineteenth century. He examines these doubts in concrete terms, and expresses through his imagery part of the truth he begins to resolve, still incomplete at this time. The concept of an "All-Loving" God who is made incarnate on earth is of course central to Browning's religious imagination, and therefore it is a recurrent theme in his poetry.[57] But he allows each *persona* to express his understanding of such an event in his own terms; frequently, as with Karshish, the character's physical knowledge of the world and nature provides a support for his growing spiritual knowledge. Like Browning with his "Old Yellow Book," Karshish takes a moment in time and refocusses it,re-creates it for himself. The moment, like the Incarnation, makes an irrevocable change in Karshish's life: this is understood by the postscript, in spite of the previous scepticism. The "moment" of the epistle is multiplied an infinite number of times in our readings of the poem; it would have to be relived in Karshish's life, too, to hold its intensity. Because he is of *this* world, he is able to embody the message in a communicable language and pattern of imagery.

Karshish, the Arab physician, gives place to Cleon, the cultivated Greek, living amidst the decline of Greek creativity, who unconsciously contrasts his own philosophic position with the teachings of St. Paul. He is a little further removed from first-hand contact with the historical Christ, and certainly more detached from the event of Incarnation. Nevertheless, in spite of his sophistry, he represents the need and readiness of a dying culture for Christianity. Cleon is a poet too, and his images and other figurative devices are much more sophisticated and extensive than those of Karshish, though not correspondingly more effective. There are fewer direct natural images, but some passages which evoke analogies from nature are central to the argument.

A. W. Crawford has evaluated "Cleon" in the following way:

> By bringing his imaginary Cleon in contact with the new doctrine of Christianity, Browning is enabled to put the Greek view of the world and of man that regarded all as finite, in contrast with the Christian view that looks upon man as an immortal spirit.[58]

Perfection in life begins to look barren to Cleon at the end of his era, though he comes "from the sprinkled isles, / Lily on lily, that o'erlace the sea, / And laugh their pride when the light wave lisps 'Greece'" (1-3). At one level he has achieved the perfection, with complacency, which Sordello and Andrea del Sarto each in his way failed to do. He is a sort of god himself, as he explains,

> I, Cleon, have effected all those things
> Thou wonderingly dost enumerate.
> That epos on thy hundred plates of gold
> Is mine,--and also mine the little chant,
> So sure to rise from every fishing-bark
> When, lights at prow, the seamen haul their net. (45-50)

He has made an "image" or statue of Apollo, he knows the "true proportions of a man" and has also written "three books on the soul."

He is master of anything that is cultivated and civilized. But Cleon is too much the aesthete who does not recognize the barbarian hovering beneath the surface. He does recognize his narrow specialization in contrast to the "whole man of the heroic age." Yet, rationalizes Cleon, the individual and perfect parts are each necessary to make up a whole, so our greater skill is a fact. "Why stay we on the earth unless to grow?" we cry out in our relative position. The cry is a nineteenth-century one, as much as it is a character of Greek civilization. Cleon has written a poem about this problem too:

> Long since, I imaged, wrote the fiction out,
> That he [Zeus] or other god descended here
> And, once for all, showed simultaneously
> What, in its nature, never can be shown,
> Piecemeal or in succession;--showed, I say,
> The worth both absolute and relative
> Of all his children from the birth of time,
> His instruments for all appointed work. (115-122)

Cleon reveals that he dreams of something more than this mortal life, some absolute knowledge of the worth of individual man.

Cleon now develops a natural analogy to illustrate the progress of physical life:

> The grapes which dye thy wine are richer far,
> Through culture, than the wild wealth of the rock;
> The suave plum than the savage-tasted drupe;
> The pastured honey-bee drops choicer sweet;
> The flowers turn double, and the leaves turn flowers
> . . . . (130-134)

Are we to say that the soul has deteriorated in direct proportion to physical improvement? Rather he, Cleon, is able to run all the souls of his artistic forebears into one soul:

> Say, is it nothing that I know them all?
> The wild flower was the larger; I have dashed
> Rose-blood upon its petals, pricked its cup's
> Honey with wine, and driven its seed to fruit,
> And show a better flower if not so large:
> I stand myself. (146-151)

The flower metaphor conveys, with its blood-red petals filled with wine for their nectar, the essence of the nineteenth-century aesthete, as well as of the Greek decadent. The flowers, like Cleon, may be said to suffer from over-cultivation. That is why a modicum of irony must be seen in Browning's seeming agreement with Cleon's argument. Cleon is a sophist, albeit revealing some attitudes Browning would adhere to; the poet is as multifaceted as his "corporate" *personae*.

Since Cleon leaves so many great works of art behind him, how can he fear death, Protos asks. Cleon answers with what is at the heart of his argument, philosophically:

> Is this apparent, when thou turn'st to muse
> Upon the scheme of earth and man in chief,
> That admiration grows as knowledge grows?
> That imperfection means perfection hid,
> Reserved in part, to grace the after-time? (182-186)

Cleon, logically, posits a supposition to Protos. Suppose you could have seen, in prehistoric times before man, the range of "earth's tenantry, from worm to bird." You would see them as perfect in themselves. If, then, Zeus had asked you, "Shall I go on a step, improve on this, / Do more for visible creatures than is done?" you would probably have answered:

> "Ay, by making each
> Grow conscious in himself--by that alone.
> All's perfect else: the shell sucks fast the rock,
> The fish strikes through the sea, the snake both swims
> And slides, forth range the beasts, the birds take flight,
> Till life's mechanics can no further go--. . . ."
> (197-202)

(The animals here are not symbolic, but rather support an argument from design for a god's existence.) These creatures are perfect, but "mere matter," receiving god's fire (life). For Zeus's last work, Protos would choose man to have a "third thing," a quality within his soul which knows, feels, and views itself, and so is happy.

Cleon rebuts this argument in his own super-consciousness of self. Protos might with better reason have said:

> "Let progress end at once,--man make no step
> Beyond the natural man, the better beast,
> Using his senses, not the sense of sense." (222-224)

It is a paradox, Cleon continues, that man has only known failure since he left the unconscious forms of life. It was called an "advance" for "man's spirit" to grow conscious of his life, taking "each step higher over the brute's head." But the end result may be seen in Cleon as a representative of his civilization, living out his years. He now sees man as dying, not progressing, in soul and body, and depicts this in an inventive metaphor (with many parallels to Tennyson's "Palace of Art"):

> This grew the only life, the pleasure-house,
> Watch-tower and treasure-fortress of the soul,
> Which whole surrounding flats of natural life
> Seemed only fit to yield subsistence to;
> A tower that crowns a country. But alas!
> The soul now climbs it just to perish there,
> For thence we have discovered ('tis no dream--
> We know this, which we had not else perceived)
> That there's a world of capability
> For joy, spread round about us, meant for us,
> Inviting us; and still the soul craves all,
> And still the flesh replies, "Take no jot more
> "Than ere you climbed the tower to look abroad!
> "Nay, so much less, as that fatigue has brought
> "Deduction to it." (231-245)

Cleon's metaphor is an expansion of "Infinite passion and the pain / Of finite hearts that yearn" and of "What will but felt the fleshly screen?" There is no division, in other words, between the central issues of the love poems and the poems dealing overtly with religion and philosophy. Moreover, the passage above, perhaps Cleon's most honest evaluation of what is missing in man's life, reads almost as a counterpart to the long central passage which was quoted from "Fra Lippo Lippi." The resolution of the two sets of feelings and images will be approached in the next chapter where Childe Roland's tower will be explored as body-soul and sensuality, not as soul and its "sense of sense."

Cleon's dilemma provides great justification for Browning's use of sensual imagery, for the sensual level of man's existence must not be cut off from his "higher" existence. A kind of schizophrenia is the inevitable result of such a dissociation. Cleon blames it on our consciousness; he cannot bear to recognize man's limitations. He claims that "'tis no dream" for we know, with our soul (consciousness) that there is a world of joy around us, yet we cannot encompass it all physically. Indeed, the higher we climb, the less we actually come in contact with sensual life. Cleon's earlier metaphor of the hybrid flower now becomes an image of the over-cultivation of the mind, which prevents him from fully enjoying life. Our life then, is inadequate to our capacity for joy, which is ever unfulfilled, the more so the higher our sensibilities are developed. We see Zeus's joy, but we can only know man's.

Protos makes Cleon an exception to this failure in, and through, progress, because Cleon is the artist. All is finite in this non-Christian world but the artist's works give him, at least, immortality. Cleon denies this emphatically:

> What? dost thou verily trip upon a word,
> Confound the accurate view of what joy is
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> With feeling joy? confound the knowing how

And showing how to live (my faculty)
With actual living? (278-283)

Even in his seeming objectivity Cleon's bitterness emerges:

I can write love-odes: thy fair slave's an ode.
I get to sing of love, when grown too grey
For being beloved: she turns to that young man,
The muscles all a-ripple on his back. (296-299)[59]

If Sappho and AEschylus indeed still live,

. . . let them come and take
Thy slave in my despite, drink from thy cup,
Speak in my place. . . . (306-308)

Cleon's fate is the deadliest of all, although of his age and kind he is the perfect example of cultivated man, for his sense of joy and his soul grow every day, yet his body correspondingly declines:

The horror quickening still from year to year,
The consummation coming past escape
When I shall know most, and yet least enjoy--
When . . .
I, I the feeling, thinking, acting man,
The man who loved his life so over-much,
Sleep in my urn. (315-323)

Cleon, then, fears death. All his knowledge and cultivation will not explain to him, nor prepare him for, this inevitability.[60]

Cleon sublimates his real reason for this letter to his master for an even longer time than did Karshish. Now Cleon's motive begins to emerge, although our only clue up to this point has been the epigraph, taken from the teachings of St. Paul of Athens. Cleon dares imagine

Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
Unlimited in capability
For joy, as this is in desire for joy. (325-327)

We will be forced by our hunger for joy to seek this state where,

Freed by the throbbing impulse we call death,
We burst there as the worm into the fly,
Who, while a worm still, wants his wings. (331-333)

The simile, with its components taken from the lower end of the animal scale, reveals the urgency of Cleon's need to shed his "mortal coil." Yet, he sighs, if this were possible, it would have been revealed by Zeus. On this pensive note the letter proper ends.

But, like Karshish, Cleon adds a most significant codicil, revealing what unconsciously has brought forth this monologue on his reason for being:

> Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew
> As Paulus proves to be, one circumcized,
> Hath access to a secret shut from us?
> Thou wrongest our philosophy, O king,
> In stooping to inquire of such an one,
> As if his answer could impose at all! (343-348)

A man who has created a statue of Apollo, god of reason and form, could not stoop to hear a barbarian, as Cleon views Paul.

> Oh, the Jew findeth scholars! certain slaves
> Who touched on this same isle, preached him and Christ;
> And (as I gathered from a bystander)
> Their doctrine could be held by no sane man. (350-353)

Cleon only knows this "Christus" by hearsay, and has no close contact, as does Karshish with Lazarus, with one who has known Jesus. He deliberately has tried to disregard the reference to Christ and his teachings which we now learn has begun to intrigue Protus. The irony of Cleon's preceding rationalizations and sincerer needs is shown in clear relief now; the answer he seeks is only kept from him because of his "sanity," logic, and reason. He has no vision such as the practical Karshish gives voice to. Yet the very form and function of the monologue, with its particular analogies from nature and its structured analysis of the one thing missing from man's existence, makes it an "infinite moment" in the persona's life, which has been affected by what his reason refuses to hear.

David, Karshish, and Cleon are able to understand a God of Love entering their worlds in direct proportion to their affinity with the sensual, living aspects of these worlds. David's nearness to nature, his "preaching" to Saul in psalm-like praise of nature, make him very open to the prophecy or vision which comes to him. However, Karshish is dramatically a more successful creation, and his carefully uttered images are most appropriate and individualized. He is a sceptic and a rationalist who in a sense uses nature; his encounter with Lazarus makes him "see" nature anew, and within his world the Face of a loving God is nearly admitted. Cleon's situation is the most complex of the three. His images from nature are contained in elaborate analogies; his desires and frustrations reveal him, strangely enough, to be a hedonist. But he has actually cut himself away from the senses, and the spirit. Consciousness of self needs a physical basis while at the same time it should lead to a loss of self, a losing of self-consciousness. His images of a super-refined world of plants and animals reveal on that microcosmic level his real need for proof of immortality of body and soul; his genuine fear of death. Zeus cannot provide the answer.

If Cleon is a man who has forgotten his links to the animal world, the persona of "Caliban Upon Setebos" is one of the fortunate creatures (in Cleon's terms) who has not grown conscious of himself, who has not developed a sense of sense, and, as his imagery reveals, who simply lives in a primitive, beastly state. A struggle is in process during the poem, however, as Caliban seeks to attain a measure of personal identity, to evolve in other spheres than the physical, to experience his god, Setebos.

It should be mentioned that "Caliban Upon Setebos" is the only poem from Dramatis Personae (1864) to be considered at length in this study, although others are referred to. I am not specifically studying Browning's shorter poems in chronological order, but a word of explanation is needed for the seeming neglect of this later volume. In Dramatic Lyrics, and Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, imagery abounds, but is less integrated with situation and character than in the major dramatic monologues and lyrics of Men and Women. Dramatis Personae "is marked," says C.R.Tracy, "by a wearing thin of the dramatic mask and a tendency to refer more or less openly to subjects which were agitating the world at the time. A Death in the Desert, for example, grew out of the controversies which were then raging over the authorship of the fourth gospel, and Mr. Sludge out of the spiritualist craze."[61] The shift to controversial, argumentative monologues perhaps explains the dearth of love lyrics; for the most part, if it is dealt with, love has culminated in disillusionment (see James Lee's Wife), which may, in turn, account for the scarcity of imagery depicting life, blossoming, and transformation. In "A Death in the Desert" there is some natural imagery, but it generally functions as analogy or example.

However, two exceptions to a lessening of imagery in proportion to a growth in "message" are "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" and "Caliban Upon Setebos." The civilized Mr. Sludge reveals by his indulgence in pseudo-intellectual animal imagery that much of his civility is only a veneer. His entire apology is couched in metaphors and similes from the animal and plant worlds. One understands Caliban's use of animal imagery and straightforward references to the more lowly of his fellow creatures. But such language is less expected in Mr. Sludge until we understand the psychological unmasking which is taking place through his continual references to creatures he tends to despise, or to like for the wrong reasons. In terms of human dignity he and those who pander to him grovel with the parasites of life--grubs, cysts, flies--in the "slime" and"dung-heaps" of society. Sludge is like Calibah in that "he sees 'the supernatural' everywhere, and everywhere concerned with himself. But," continues C.H.Herford,

> . . . Caliban's religion of terror, cunning, and cajolery is more estimable than Sludge's business-like faith in the virtue of wares for which he finds so profitable a market, and which he gets on such easy terms. Caliban tremblingly does his best to hitch his waggon to Setebos's star --when Setebos is looking; Sludge is convinced that the stars are once for all hitched to his waggon; that heaven is occupied in catering for his appetite and becoming an accomplice in his sins.[62]

Sludge is interesting to study, too, in his role as artist, albeit charlatan,and 'medium'; Browning's harshness does not blind him to the affinity between poet and spiritualist, as tellers of lies that contain the truth, more or less. The difference, of course, is more than one of degree.

We turn, then, to "Caliban Upon Setebos," subtitled "Or, Natural Theology in the Island," and Caliban's anthropomorphic understanding of his god. The poem is suggested, say both Tracy and DeVane, by the controversy over "the missing link which Darwin's Origin of Species(1859) had recently made a subject of general discussion."[63] But in fact the satire of the poem touches representative aspects of the development of man's religious thought from the Greeks onwards to Calvin and Natural Theology.[64] By putting such thoughts in embryo naturalistic form in the mouth of the "primitive" Caliban, Browning is able to comment on the affinity between so-called primitive superstition and advanced civilizations--if God's Love and Revelation are lacking.

The poem needs to be set in its intellectual context. The reputation Browning gained as a sceptic about knowledge because of his opposition to the field of historical criticism is somewhat redeemed by his scientific aptitudes and interests. In spite of his Evangelical background, Browning's essential non-orthodoxy made it possible for him to cut across sects and intellectual controversies of the period. He was, it is true, in the vanguard of those who expressed dismay at the implications of the 1860 Essays and Reviews, growing as they did out of the evolutionary spillover into other areas,[65] and who were scandalized by Bishop Colenso's (of Natal) examination of the Old Testament in the light of mathematics and probability, and by his attempts to adapt Christianity to the Zulus.[66] Browning referred directly to these two events in "Gold Hair: A Story of Pornic." In fact, as W.O.Raymond tells us,

> The publication of Dramatis Personae in 1864 coincides in point of time with the signing of the Oxford Declaration by eleven thousand clergymen of the establishment [a pledge supporting the Scriptures as divine Revelation and the Word of God]. It was a restless and troubled epoch in the religious thought of England, when the theological controversies stirred up by Biblical Criticism were reaching an acute stage.[67]

But Browning was not simply being reactionary, or fearful for the state of the established Church, or anti-intellectual. His own concept of God hinged not on what could be validated historically, or even on what could be observed in nature, but on the revelation of Love coming to earth in the Incarnation. In spirit he was not utterly removed from Jowett and the Broad-Churchmen, some of whom were responsible for Essays and Reviews, who wanted to face the issues of evolution and Biblical Criticism head-on, and who did not remain satisfied with a "God of the gaps"--another name for Natural Theology. "Convinced as they were that the Incarnation influenced all aspects of the created world, they believed they could present the Gospel to a sceptical generation in terms other than those used by 'conventional Christianity into which no one is to enquire. . . .'"[68] Browning's approach was still of course determined by feeling rather than rational evidence, but Incarnation was at the centre of his theology also.

"Caliban Upon Setebos" makes no overt references to Essays and Reviews, Bishop Colenso, or "Higher Criticism." Yet it is conceivable that "Natural Theology in the Island" could be motivated by Bishop Colenso's attempts to adapt Christianity to a primitive people. In any case, Caliban's mind leads him naturally to form, simply, many of the structures of belief more civilized man has prided himself on. As Michael Timko says, "Caliban simply is representative of one who fails to approach God in the right way. He lacks the emotional response necessary for the direct, intuitional knowledge of the God of Love. He is, in short, a rationalist; he believes in natural theology."[69] This leads eventually to Caliban's hedonism, and ultimately to scepticism and atheism.

I want now to examine the natural imagery in "Caliban Upon Setebos" to show how Caliban's language supports the various religious stances satirized in the poem, but also to show that Caliban is not just a mouthpiece for these ideas. He is a fully created dramatis _persona_ revealing through his choice of images and analogies far more about himself than he consciously understands. Caliban's language is indeed earthy and on the surface natural, but he reveals some perverse sides to his nature. Yet he is not the subhuman beast made out by some critics.[70] Rather, according to Herford, "Caliban is one of Browning's most consummate realists; he has the remorselessly vivid perceptions of a Lippo Lippi or a Sludge."[71] Caliban's metaphors and similes are visual, and, more significantly in terms of Browning's imagery, tactile. They are certainly very "concrete." But it is not for his sensuality as such that Caliban is to be proven either right _or_ wrong.

When we first meet Caliban, the "efts" for which Browning professed such fondness are Caliban's intimate companions as he feels them course "about his spine." He lies in the mire and slush, simply letting nature flow around him, as pompion-plants tickle him, "a flower drops with a bee inside, / And now a fruit to snap at, catch and crunch,--" (10-11) all seeming to emphasize Caliban's animal nature. In truth, he is a budding Epicurean. His make-up deliberately questions our understanding and presumptions about man, especially civilized man. His is a strange Eden, for he seems already to have eaten of the bitter fruit of knowledge; yet his resting place is not in fact full of horrors, and it is certainly not a wasteland.

Browning's Caliban, still the slave of Prosper which he is as Shakespeare's Caliban ("this thing of darkness I / acknowledge mine" in Prospero's words[72]), soliloquizes in the third person, as if his sense of "I" was not yet developed. Indeed, because of this his egoism or _hubris_ is unbounded in an almost pre-AEschylean sense. There is no visible audience but he addresses himself to Setebos--his god and his alter-ego. He argues with him, taunts him, finally prostrates himself before him in fear (as Shakespeare's Caliban does before Prospero, but also as the Calvinist might do, mentally, before his God). Caliban lets his "rank tongue blossom into speech" to vex him "whom his dam called God"--Setebos.

From the image of sunbeams crossing one another above the sea "till they weave a spider-web / (Meshes of fire, some great fish breaks at times)" (13-14), we are given one naturalistic figure of speech after another, in Caliban's attempt to render what is unknown, and therefore to be feared, into concrete terms. Setebos is likened to an "icy fish,"

> That longed to 'scape the rock-stream where she lived,
> And thaw herself within the lukewarm brine
> O' the lazy sea . . .
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> Only, she ever sickened, found repulse,
> At the other kind of water, not her life,
> (Green-dense and dim-delicious, bred o' the sun)
> Flounced back from bliss she was not born to breathe,
> And in her old bounds buried her despair,
> Hating and loving warmth alike: so He. (34-43)

Setebos remains in his cold element, but creates creatures to live on this isle beneath the sun; then he envies them. Mrs. Melchiori feels that this poem is full of sexual symbolism, and animal and plant imagery suitable to both Caliban and Darwin. "And reading the symbolism we find that the reason given for Setebos' creation of both men and animals is simply so that they can supply the faculty of reproduction which the god does not possess."[73] However, if we remember Caliban's history from The Tempest, he has been punished for his own lusting after Miranda; the envy he projects onto Setebos is his own. A god who wishes nature and man to reproduce themselves unceasingly is a perversion of the myth of creation found in Plato's Timaeus.

Melchiori and John Howard both tend to stress Caliban's animalistic, naive qualities which of course are quite evident in the monologue. But I see an important connection between Caliban, the primitive, and the super-cultivated man, Cleon. They appear to be opposites; Caliban is like the beast without consciousness to whom Cleon refers. Yet Cleon's abstract articulation and his "sense of sense," do not give him what he needs. Neither a Caliban at one end of the scale nor a Cleon at the other is experiencing joy in life. Both Zeus and Setebos fail to give their worshippers what they, without fully realizing it, most yearn for: a scheme that would include Love.

The creation Caliban describes contains a rich abundance of life, and should be like Eden before man's expulsion. But unlike the world which David sang about to Saul, all warm, beautiful, and bountiful, Caliban's imagery suggests if not "Nature, red in tooth and claw," at least a very greedy, hungry, unfeeling, and quick-witted (in order to insure their survival, no doubt) group of animals. Observed neutrally, the animals which cavort about Caliban are not totally grotesque and loathsome, but Caliban seems to relish their sometimes cruel or parasitic means for attaining sustenance from the misfortunes of others or from decayed matter. Thus the otter is "lithe as a leech," the auk is "one fire-eye in a ball of foam," the badger watches by night with his "slant white-wedge eye" and the magpie's long tongue searches "deep into oakwarts for a worm." We are reminded of Sludge's ant-eater mentioned earlier. Caliban's sardonic vision invests these animals and the insects on which they may feed with a power out of proportion, once again, to their size. Caliban claims that Setebos made all these creatures out of "envy, listlessness or sport" because he could not make himself a mate in his own image. They are admired by their creator for their bravery, yet mocked in their impotency in face of his real plagues. Thus Caliban sees his maker.

In order to put himself in a state in which his imagination will really run rampant, Caliban in Browning's poem anticipates the liquorous state into which Caliban of The Tempest is led by the intruders from civilization, by making a home brew:

> . . . I melt a gourd-fruit into mash,
> Add honeycomb and pods, I have perceived
> Which bite like finches when they bill and kiss,--
> Then, when froth rises bladdery, drink up all,
> Quick, quick, till maggots scamper through my brain;
> Last, throw me on my back i' the seeded thyme
> And wanton, wishing I were born a bird. (68-74)

Caliban is not to be scorned as a primitive for his state; it is very analogous to hedonism and Epicureanism. He presumes that the god's motives for making man arose out of such mental fantasies as are induced by liquors. If he could not be a bird, he would (trying to put himself in Setebos' place) make one out of clay, a Caliban with wings and "a sting to do his foes offence."

> There, and I will that he begin to live,
> Fly to yon rock-top, nip me off the horns
> Of grigs high up that make the merry din,
> Saucy through their veined wings, and mind me not. (81-84)

Setebos must use his creatures to get at one another; thus Caliban would pit the bird against the crickets which annoy him. But if that bird's leg broke, Caliban would laugh, and if begged to repair the wrong he might arbitrarily decide to give the bird three legs, "Or pluck the other off, leave him like an egg, / And lessoned he was mine and merely clay" (93-94). We see then, how Setebos is partly the Calvinist God who elects to save or damn individuals; equally he is a product of Darwinian "natural selection" or "survival of the fittest" which in spite or because of its reliance on accident can seem deterministic also. Caliban's analogy plays on man's flesh being like clay, malleable and mortal:

> Were this no pleasure lying in the thyme,
> Drinking the mash, with brain become alive,
> Making and moving clay at will? So He." (95-97)

Caliban's next "imaging" makes Setebos even more arbitrary as he gives or withholds cruelty or salvation at will. John Howard feels that Caliban's cruelty is "derived from the rude forces of the nature that he inhabits," that he is cruel like an animal hunting for food.[74] Surely the cruelty is in himself, projected onto his god at one level, onto the animal world at the other. It is a cruelty resulting from his own fears, guilts, frustrations, desires. For Browning is not dealing literally with a primitive man; Caliban's state symbolizes that of civilized man.

Setebos is amoral in a sense, being neither right nor wrong, kind nor cruel, but merely omnipotent and strong, "lording" it over Caliban as Caliban can have power over the crabs which file past him--he may let twenty pass in freedom, then stone the twenty-first; or,

> 'Say the first straggler that boasts purple spots
> Shall join the file, one pincer twisted off;
> 'Say, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,
> And two worms he whose nippers end in red;
> As it likes me each time, I do: so He. (104-108)

The whole scheme is a commentary on voluntarist Calvinism with its doctrine of election. Caliban sees Setebos in the workings of nature.

For, ironically, the fence he builds up to prevent "she-tortoises / Crawling to lay their eggs here" (206-207) is washed away by one wave, like a snake, sent by Setebos to "lick away his work." Caliban even imputes a fossilized newt to Setebos' envy (lines 214-215).

Could one please Setebos, and prevent his destructiveness (as Prosper does, since he is favoured by the gods)? But it seems impossible to discover the way to please him asSetebos accepts one type of appeasement one day, another one the next. One must never grow confident that one knows "His ways, and play Him off, / Sure of the issue" (224-225). Just as Caliban may spare the squirrel who boldly "steals the nut from underneath my thumb, / And when I threat, bites stoutly in defence" (227-228), or likewise

> 'Spareth an urchin that contrariwise,
> Curls up into a ball, pretending death
> For fright at my approach (229-231)

so is Setebos as arbitrary. But should the squirrel take his safety for granted, then wrath would fall on him. Obedience does not necessarily bring reward; in Calvinist doctrine the elect are predestined to be saved, and do not alter their situation by good works.

One thing is certain and consistent: what is, will now and forever be, as long as "He" lives. Caliban does not believe that the pain continues after death, simply because "He doth His worst in this our life," reserves worst pain for the last, and then—nothing. Zeus, too, had revealed nothing to Cleon; both visions are bounded and finite. And for nineteenth-century man, Calvinism and the materialism brought on by the new science and philosophy could equally leave him with "nothing" if he were not "naturally" selected to be among the elect. Meanwhile, the hard realities of life advise that one not seem too happy; just as Caliban kills the ornamental flies and aids the painfully labouring beetles, so does Setebos treat his creatures. Pleasure is not to be engaged in except surreptitiously.

Caliban is perhaps free, if that is the correct term, to express what is usually veiled in nineteenth-century man. His primitive frankness means that he hides none of his own hates, fears, feelings of impotency which he projects and externalizes upon Setebos and nature. By impotency I mean a sense of frustration amidst teeming life which seems to flourish or die at the whimsy of some external force. What would Caliban really like? We are given insight into his desires when we see him trying to emulate Prosper, a nobler being who is lord of him. Caliban

> Weareth at whiles for an enchanter's robe
> The eyed skin of a supple oncelot;
> And hath an ounce sleeker than youngling mole,
> A four-legged serpent he makes cower and couch,
> Now snarl, now hold its breath and mind his eye,
> And saith she is Miranda and my wife:
> 'Keeps for his Ariel a tall pouch-bill crane
> He bids go wade for fish and straight disgorge;
> Also a sea-beast, lumpish, which he snared,
> Blinded the eyes of, and brought somewhat tame,
> And split its toe-webs, and now pens the drudge
> In a hole o' the rock and calls him Caliban;
> A bitter heart that bides its time and bites. (155-167)

As usual this passage is revealing not of Prosper, but of Caliban, who is lacking in his master's sense of justice and mercy. His "Miranda" is a serpent, which shows his fear and distrust of the girl. "Ariel" is merely a creature to be used. And "Caliban"--a blinded lumpish sea-beast kept captive in a rock hole. He could not have a more degrading self-image, for he seems to be regressing in his biological make-up. It is the treatment of the sea-beast which is most degrading to it.

Caliban chooses this amorphous creature, all its eyes blinded, its few powers gone, to represent himself who "Plays thus at being Prosper in a way, / Taketh his mirth with make-believe: so He" (168-169).

Who does Setebos play at being? Caliban believes that there is a being who transcends Setebos, who has the peace and calm the demi-god is lacking--known as Quiet. Caliban's conception here seems to mirror another earlier development of civilized man, for it is "like the Greek myth of Chronos and Saturn, and of Fate controlling even the gods. "But wherefore rough, why cold and ill at ease? / Aha, that is a question!" (126-127). The only being who can answer such a question is the one who made Setebos, the "something quiet o'er His head, / Out of His reach . . . . This Quiet" (132-133, 137). Caliban's "dam held that the Quiet made all things / Which Setebos vexed only" (170-171). It has no need to envy, and only cares "for Setebos / The many-handed as a cuttle-fish" (141-142). Setebos, realizing he cannot reach that quiet, happy life,

> Next looks down here, and out of very spite
> Makes this a bauble world to ape yon real,
> These good things to match those as hips do grapes.(146-148)

Here Browning seems definitely to be mimicking, through Caliban, the Platonic concept of ideal and bauble worlds, real and imitation. Baker writes, "Setebos is something of a Platonic demiurge, creating the world in imitation of eternal and perfect ideas. Quiet, on the other hand, is more like Aristotle's God, an Unmoved Mover. To say that Caliban thinks like Plato, Aristotle, and Calvin does not mean that Browning committed gross anachronism."[75] Rather, as we said before, Caliban is led naturally to these beliefs, which without revelation are not much better than primitivism, no matter how civilized they may appear on the surface.

Although Caliban obviously yearns for Quiet, he believes that Setebos is in control. He wishes Quiet to conquer Setebos, or for the latter to doze away, decrepit (as if Setebos were material and not spiritual). Whoever made weak creatures made them to be vexed. Otherwise why was not Caliban provided with armour like the orc? This would spoil "His" sport. Caliban sees himself as the most vulnerable of all the creatures, as, indeed, man without his adaptive mental processes would also feel himself to be. Caliban seems to cry out for something more. Either his god intentionally created him to be a victim, or else there is no "Divine" plan. It is much like modern man's cry: Why is suffering included in the scheme of things?

To placate Setebos, and trick him, Caliban pretends always to work hard and be envious. He only dances on dark nights, "Moans in the sun, gets under holes to laugh, / And never speaks his mind save housed as now: /Outside, 'groans, curses" (267-269). If he were to be caught he would offer a sacrifice--cutting off a finger or giving up some of his favourite treats--just as man, in his guilt over enjoyed pleasures, offers appeasement. Yet such an idea is an ancient one, in line with Greek tragedy, in which those who are too proud or happy are struck down. Caliban, as was mentioned before, seems to be unconcerned about *hubris*. His self-mutilation is in placation of a god of power, for that is *all* his god is. Caliban mocks Setebos from his hiding place, claiming he does not envy the god who can enjoy no sensual pleasures. Yet how close is Setebos to Caliban's own sense of frustration?

A sudden silence, in which crickets and birds cease their songs, as before a storm, seems a warning to Caliban that Setebos has heard his soliloquy, that there has been an audience. Or perhaps Setebos' raven messenger (like the black bird of Apollyon in "Childe Roland") has told of Caliban's impudence.

> It was fool's play, this prattling! He! The wind
> Shoulders the pillared dust, death's house o' the move,
> And fast invading fires begin! White blaze--
> A tree's head snaps--and there, there, there, there, there
> His thunder follows! Fool to gibe at Him! (287-291)

In mortal terror now, Caliban promises anything "so he may 'scape!" It is natural that the anthropomorphic god whom Caliban has created should then appear to reveal himself through the power and might of the storm. And it is crucial that this is no moment of epiphany, such as the one which revealed a loving God to David--when nature was strangely hushed. Caliban has depended on a very elemental form of rationalism, and has been granted no revelation. Surely this is what Browning feared would be the outcome of any form of Natural Theology, be it Paley's, Butler's or Colenso's.[76] The epigraph of the poem defines Browning's position: "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself"(Psalms i, 21). Even though Browning feels some pity for and even identification with Caliban, he disagrees implicitly with the anthropomorphic god of Caliban's making.[77]

There can be no connection between the spiteful god projected from Caliban, and the God of Love revealed to Browning. When compared with "Saul," for example, we see that although both poems begin with reasoning from the self, Caliban stays there, while David becomes a seer and goes far beyond himself. The poem is a commentary on man's rational means of dealing with the unknown, from ancient theologies, to Calvinism and the doctrine of election, to Natural Theology. There can be no bridge from natural theologies to true theology, no connection between Caliban's God of angry power and the Christian God of Love.

What Cleon at one end of the scale, and Caliban at the other both seek is a divine being such as the God of John in "A Death in the Desert." John believes that man's understanding of God has evolved; therefore Caliban's materialistic concept could be a logical first step. But John ponders that very question:

> Before the point was mooted 'What is God?'
> No savage man inquired 'What am myself?'
> Much less replied, 'First, last, and best of things.'(549-551)

That progression has been reversed by Caliban since he works from himself outwards. Seeing him, Cleon would say it were better for man not to have been given consciousness,not to have been made the "better beast." Caliban's frustrations, purely physical though they appear, emphasize Cleon's own predicament: his ability to "know" a god's joy but only to be capable of the finite, flesh-weakened joy of man. Caliban is in the mire seeking to rise; Cleon is in his tower of the soul seeking communication with earth.[78]

Caliban is a persona immersed in nature, suffused with the plant and animal elements which form the bulk of his idiom and figures of speech. That he is not happy, not fully aware of himself, and that he is strangely deluded about the nature of the universe, are indications that the senses by themselves will not lead man out of his wilderness, nor enable him to achieve a true affinity with nature. However, we have seen that Caliban is only on one level a primitive; his chief arguments parody many of evolving, civilized man's rational explanations of the universe and man's place in it. For example, civilized man may be a hedonist who uses, manipulates, but does not love nature or his

Maker, whatever form his God might assume. The riotousness of Caliban's nature may in the end portray the riotousness of the mind which sees the immediate parts only, and never the whole design or atonement in which body and spirit are one. Life is around him in all forms, but there is fear and trembling in Caliban's heart, so that he misses the meaning and essence of his world. In this poem the animal-plant world is literally a microcosm for man's world; the relations between himself and nature, or between Setebos and man, as far as Caliban is concerned, are exactly those deterministic relationships which exist between animal and animal, or animal and plant in nature.

In Browning's minute investigation into this microcosmic world through the "glass" of his senses and the medium of language, he has given us moments of evil--spiders, wild animals, and murderous states of mind. Just as the infinite for Browning is a continuation of the finite, so are good and evil part of the same world, and the savage an undeniable part of civilized man. Knowing Browning's predilection for the grotesque, and his "barbarism," to use Santayana's term, we expect to see a poem where these elements dominate. They have been apparent in "Caliban Upon Setebos." But "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and The Ring and the Book probe more deeply and fully into man in relation to his inner nature. The souls of his *personae* in these poems are expressed by Browning even more vividly and revealingly in terms of organic nature, and of imagery from the plant and animal kingdoms. Out of the descent underground will come an innocence arising from, and in spite of, an experience of darkness, evil, and the demonic.

# CHAPTER III

# THE DARK TOWER

> To the spectator the horrific images are background. To the dreamer they are foreground. You can't dream pictorially but only iconically. Does the psychiatrist form story lines for dreams?
>
> --Marshall McLuhan[1]

## A: Introduction

In "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" one becomes involved in the horror of the nightmare, and cannot remain a spectator. The brute and the beast which have been on the periphery of Browning's poetry now become overt and impossible to ignore, taking a "foreground" position in the *persona's* mind. The kind of transformation Roland undergoes is from a death-in-life exploration of his own psyche to a life-in-death conquering of his worst fears. Natural imagery in the dream becomes unnatural, perverse, cruel, even death-bringing. But the ultimate function of Browning's animal and plant imagery is to affirm life. It is only that when all else fails, it becomes necessary to turn from the dream of what might be, in the garden of innocence, to the nightmare of what *is*, in the garden of experience. We will explore some possible "story lines" for Childe Roland's nightmare, then, not rigidly but flexibly, as the nature of poems and dreams demands.

Although "Childe Roland" is often considered atypical of Browning's poetry, Roland is not far removed from any of Browning's *personae* met with so far. Each is consciously or unconsciously exploring his own psyche or soul, and this exploration is separated from

Roland's inner monologue only by degree. However, the poetic presentation does differ. The animals and plants which are such central images continually act as a kind of counterpoint to the conscious level of each persona's narrative or monologue. Now the image indeed becomes the medium for experiencing; in a sense, experience is all, as perceptions override logical thought patterns. But after the dream, which in this case is the poem, may come the dream-analysis. By such a process one returns to the approximate dream-thoughts which first gave rise to the dream. Ultimately the dream poem is seen to be closer to Browning's more consciously conceived poems than has generally been recognized.

After considering some of the speculation which "Childe Roland" has already aroused I will present in effect two readings of the poem. One will examine the imagery in the light of the function it carries out in Browning's poems examined above, and the "message" which we have seen growing out of the imagery; the second will seek a deeper level of meaning by looking at the poem in the light of its affinity with surrealism and Freudian psychology (with some assistance from Jungian archetypes). Both readings rely to a large extent on the other poems in Browning's canon for their verification and also for a possible resolution to some of the problems encountered in them.

More has been written about "Childe Roland" than perhaps about any other Browning poem.[2] It is reassuring to know, however, that frequent dissection has not destroyed the poem's integrity, nor has it solved its essential mystery. It is a particularly difficult poem to interpret because it originated in a dream-state. No matter how many words are used to expand and interpret a single image, one always returns in the end to the bare image itself. The poem's complex symbolism, with its surface directness, makes it a key for, almost an archetype of, the rest of the canon.

Browning claimed to be conscious of no allegorical intention in writing the poem; at the same time he did not repudiate the possibility of such an analysis.[3] It is the poet's prerogative not to assess his work according to "intention." In the strictest sense the poem is not, in any case, an allegory, though some critics feel otherwise.[4] The poem is less objective, less rational, than may be supposed by its framework. Here, as in the other dramatic monologues, Browning does seek to objectify the experience, it is true. But in this poem more than in any other, we feel the "I" of the poem may be the "I" of ourselves or even of the collective unconscious, and we cannot escape, ultimately, from making the quest with the knight.

What is the nature of Roland's quest? To answer this question it is first necessary to examine the poem's background and some of its central critiques. The quest has not been an overt theme thus far in the discussion of animal and plant imagery. Nevertheless, it recurs as theme and image in many of the poems. The quest for the infinite moment or the perfect answer to an inarticulated riddle, for instance, finds its metaphor in the web which the spider weaves in "Two In the Campagna." Also, we saw that in "By the Fire-side" the action involved a personal quest through very real country to discover the good minute, in the heart, as well as in nature. Childe Roland's quest encompasses all these quests, as well as quests outside Browning's poetry. It is not necessary to discover exactly what gave Browning the conscious idea for the total poem and its individual scenes. However, essential allusions and their possible sources will be reviewed.

The title of the poem is from this three-line song of Edgar in King Lear:

> "Child Roland to the dark tower came;
> His word was still, 'Fie, foh, and fum,
> I smell the blood of a British man.'"[5]

Charles Woodard writes of this conscious source for the poem's title:

> Apparently something in that line, with its possible implication of a quest undertaken and nearing its object, awoke in Browning's unconscious mind the appropriate archetypal response, in which the quest and the waste-land imagery are indissolubly associated. Behind the poem we glimpse the primeval mysteries of vegetation myth, fertility cult, and ritual murder.[6]

I would like to examine more closely the context of the line from King Lear, for I believe the environments of both the knight-errant and Edgar may be seen as projections of their inner turmoil and searching. In this scene in which Edgar appears as Mad Tom there is an intense concentration of animal imagery, significant to Edgar, and to Roland who is a figment, one might say, of Edgar's imagination. Browning's poem becomes a regressive image for the Shakespearean character who chants the title.

The "hoary cripple" who directs Roland onto the tract which should contain the Dark Tower is archetypally related to Tom's foul fiend: "Who gives anything to poor Tom? whom the foul fiend hath led through fire and through flame, and through ford and whirlpool o'er bog and quagmire. . . ."[7] Only the fire is absent as a physical fact from Roland's journey, but even it is present by suggestion, and in actuality at the journey's end. The transformation of his landscape must have been the work of a moody fool, again akin to the foul fiend, for the river is described as a bath for the "fiend's glowing hoof." Water populated by horrid creatures is not unfamiliar to Poor Tom,

> . . . that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt, and the water; that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cowdung for salads, swallows the old rat and the ditch dog; drinks the green mantle of the standing pool . . . .[8]

Roland spears what may be a water-rat as he fords the river; in spirit the other animals match Browning's creatures from this and other poems. Finally there is the famous string of animal characteristics which Edgar, as Mad Tom, attributes to himself. These images are not unlike the images of lust and frustration in "Childe Roland": Edgar utters, "Wine loved I dearly, dice dearly; and in woman out-paramour'd the Turk: false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolfin greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey."[9] Roland, like the "Band" who have preceded him,also has left his former life, with all its guilts, to test himself in this strange quest, much as Edgar is tested when confronted with his darker nature on the heath.

The title of the poem, then, provides one valuable and far-reaching perspective for viewing Childe Roland's quest. However, there is tangible evidence for other sources to which Browning had access, as DeVane points out for us. Some of the images for the poem were suggested to Browning from reading Gerard de Lairasse's The Art of Painting in All Its Branches. In this book were listed the subjects considered horrible and undesirable in painting: "the old cripple, the pathless field, the desperate vegetation, the spiteful little river, the killing of the water-rat, the enclosing mountains, the leering sunset, and many other details . . . ."[10] It is relevant to see that such a visual poem was partially inspired by art criticism. But Browning's use of these images is imaginative rather than prosaic, symbolic as well as literal.

As a verbal painting, then, this poem may be called a landscape of the unconscious. It is clear to Robert Langbaum that the knight's "journey across the devastated landscape must be treated as experience, because it cannot be judged morally or logically."[11] Or, in an important essay entitled "Childe Roland and Browning's Journey to Evil," Roppen and Sommer write that the poem,

> . . .like Tennyson's Ulysses exploits the theme of a quest that is not, strictly speaking, teleological, but an unfolding experience pointing to human fulfilment in terms of moral dedication and courage. . . . [The] meaning of the goal lies outside the expressed awareness of the protagonists, and it is necessary to the emotional dynamic in the poems that this should be so. The experience out of which they grow is one that can be more effectively explored through symbols of landscape and discovery, but even if fully understood it could not yield an ultimate destination or arrival, because such a complete resolution of the underlying emotional conflicts and impulses would cancel out the very uncertainty on which the poems depend for their total meaning. Moreover, there are strong reasons for thinking that the experience. . . was not fully nor even well understood.[12]

Although these critics and Langbaum agree on the essential "experience," they diverge on whether or not the experience can be judged morally. This only exemplifies one arm of the continuing debate surrounding the poem. Barbara Melchiori, for instance, says that the poem is blackly pessimistic in contrast to Browning's general trend to optimism.[13] Other, earlier, critics have seen the poem as a literal Christian allegory about the virtues of courage, endurance and salvation. No one answer is wholly true; yet there is no need to turn the poem into an affirmation of relativism. As can be seen, Browning has an absolute centre to his world, though he does not often expect it to be gained. He balances on the precarious line between optimism and pessimism.

The imagery is archetypally that of the quest; as well it alludes to specific quests in literature. Two such literary sources are Malory's tale of Gareth and La Chanson de Roland. Mrs. Melchiori develops the parallels between Bunyan and Browning, with specific reference to "Childe Roland."[14] The quest naturally leads to theme and imagery of the wasteland: the old cripple who directs the narrator, the other knights who have gone before and failed, the long wanderings over many years, imagery of water and fire to suggest death and purging, the tower, and the blighted, sick wilderness which is itself an antithesis of the Garden of Eden. It is the desert which was once a garden, innocence transformed by experience. [15] Curtis Dahl has subjected "Childe Roland" to this level of interpretation in his essay "The Victorian Wasteland." He relates the poem to other wasteland poems, emphasizing the courage, the need to go on at any cost, the physical nature of the trials, as Childe Roland traverses the "barren waste that lies in the shadow of the valley of death."[16] For Dahl, the landscape is almost incidental to the positive outlook of Roland, undaunted, here by choice, directed to a definite goal, and not spiritually deprived.

## B: "Such Starved Ignoble Nature": A Negative

An extended analysis of the images which have been focussed upon in the previous chapters is now in order. We will see them unite to point towards the possibility of a psychoanalytical reading which will give essential insight into the artistic unconscious, and into the deeper meaning of "Childe Roland" and other poems. Although the imagery does present a wasteland picture, as has been noted, it contains more than that one metaphor; rather the image patterns are manifestations of the unconscious desires of the persona. Paradoxically, these desires are revealed by the great stress on the negative, which through its pictorialization, eventually opens the way for a positive affirmation.

Here, now, Childe Roland pursues his path across the plain, having left the formal road at the instigation of the "hoary cripple":

> So, on I went. I think I never saw
> Such starved ignoble nature; nothing throve:
> For flowers--as well expect a cedar grove!
> But cockle, spurge, according to their law
> Might propagate their kind, with none to awe,
> You'd think; a burr had been a treasure-trove. (55-60)

In the eyes of the quester the landscape is a negative one, harsh and unkind. To see the way Browning has used landscape to evoke mood, one must only contrast it with the more consciously evoked landscape in "By the Fire-side." In that poem, where the quest is positive and successful, the plant life is mature, fruitful, sensuous, and evocative of desire fulfilled. In "Childe Roland" the few plants which do appear take on vicious human characteristics, and appear emasculated rather than virile:

> If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk
> Above its mates, the head was chopped; the bents
> Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents
> In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to baulk
> All hope of greenness? 't is a brute must walk
> Pashing their life out, with a brute's intents. (67-72)

The sound of the consonants echoes the sense of the passage, with many obstacles preventing smooth enunciation. A similar landscape may be found as early as Sordello, where "The thoroughfares were overrun with weed / --Docks, quitchgrass, loathly mallows no man plants" (IV,22-23). There are clear suggestions, in "Childe Roland," of rape of the land by the "brute," who is never identified, but who has numerous symbolic and psychological connotations. The sexual impotence and sterility in nature is conveyed further by these lines, which again present a sharp contrast to the stanzas evoking the body in "By the Fire-side":

> As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair
> In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud
> Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood. (73-75)

Here sickness and horror are conveyed in the human images.

Roland's journey is one without logical direction, and is ungoverned by time in a chronological sense. Succeeding scenes, people, objects, animals, encountered in the journey contradict each other. The landscape changes suddenly, as it would in a dream, without the speaker having seemed to move:

> A sudden little river crossed my path
> As unexpected as a serpent comes.
> No sluggish tide congenial to the glooms;
> This, as it frothed by, might have been a bath
> For the fiend's glowing hoof--to see the wrath
> Of its black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes.
> (109-114)

The diction here, as in other places, is almost Hopkinesque, and echoes similar diction in "Up At a Villa--Down In the City" although the key of that poem is in the major rather than the minor. There are immediate parallels, of course, with The Waste Land, where the river recurs throughout. There have been other rivers and many paths in Browning's poems, but none so angry, so possessed of a dark or evil force as this one. The river is also compared to a serpent, a reminder to us that the land (as was Eden) is blighted by some form of evil.

As the "old mill-horse" in "Fra Lippo Lippi" is the most important animal image for the revelation of theme, suggesting the unconscious enjoyment of life for its own sake through the senses, so is the horse a focussing symbol in "Childe Roland." However, this horse is dying and mechanical; his masculinity has become impotent:

> One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare,
> Stood stupified, however he came there:
> Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!
>
> Alive? he might be dead for aught I know,
> With that red gaunt and colloped neck a-strain,
> And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane;
> Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;
> I never saw a brute I hated so;
> He must be wicked to deserve such pain. (76-84)

Contrast this with the wild sexual passion conveyed in the horse imagery in "A Lover's Quarrel." The speaker of the poem is describing to his mistress the Pampas,

> Where the sun-flowers blow
> In a solid glow,
> And to break now and then the screen--
> Black neck and eyeballs keen,
> Up a wild horse leaps between!

It is a sexual "life force" in contrast to the dying horse encountered by Roland. As a parallel, the cypress in "De Gustibus--" is physically very like this horse, for it is "red-rusted, / Rough iron-spiked, ripe fruit-o'ercrusted." In a sense, every image in "Childe Roland" is death-like, every figure or portion of the landscape only a different visual projection of the same fantasy. The river, the horse, the landscape are all harsh and brutal, or "grotesque." Why must the horse be "wicked," or "deserve" such pain? Why is he such an object of hatred for Roland?

When crossing the river, where willows fling themselves "in a fit / Of mute despair, a suicidal throng," he fears to step on a dead man's cheek, and is horrified when he strikes something in the water: "--It may have been a water-rat I speared / But ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek! (125-126).[17] In Sordello that grotesque image of mutilation appeared in variant form, in one of the sections on war. Then, the metaphor depicted the son unearthing his own mother from the ground:

> Now both feet plough the ground, deeper each time,
> At last, za za, and up with a fierce kick
> Comes his own mother's face caught by the thick
> Grey hair about his spur! (IV,104-107)

Everything is seen in terms of death. On the opposite bank of the river, where Roland had hoped to find a better country, the landscape is beaten and battle-scarred:

> Who were the strugglers, what war did they wage,
> Whose savage trample thus could pad the dank
> Soil to a plash? Toads in a poisoned tank,
> Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage-- . . . .(129-132)[18]

The colour red brings associations with the "Red leer" which the dying day "shot" out as Roland ventured on the plain, and with the gaunt red horse. If the lynx in "An Epistle. . . of Karshish" suggests the potential of sexual strength and forces of the unconscious ready to be unleashed, the animal images here of toads and wild cats in terrible captivity would symbolize frustration to the point of madness.

That this is a diseased country through which the knight-errant journeys is already evident. There is another stanza to substantiate the physical human sickness in this unnatural nature, which ends in a death image with the grim personification of the oak tree, truly a death-mask:

> Now blotches rankling, coloured gay and grim,
>     Now patches where some leanness of the soil's
>     Broke into moss or substances like boils;
> Then came some palsied oak, a cleft in him
> Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim
>     Gaping at death, and dies while it recoils. (151-156)

The first half of this stanza recalls the setting which was the meeting place between Karshish and Lazarus, that figure who has seen death, and who now hovers between life and death.[19]

The imagery continues to present a state of purgatory, even an inferno, and the knight is "as far as ever from the end!" With no warning, however, the first portent of journey's end, a "great black bird, Apollyon's bosom friend" sails past, perhaps Roland's guide. The plain gives way to mountains which come into focus as if they had been there always:

> Yet half I seemed to recognize some trick
>     Of mischief happened to me, God knows when--
>     In a bad dream perhaps. Here ended, then,
> Progress this way. When, in the very nick
> Of giving up, one time more, came a click
>     As when a trap shuts--you're inside the den! (169-174)

He, like the wild cat he imagined, is also in a trap, but a trap which will prove, paradoxically, the means of his deliverance, his freedom.[20]

The climax of the poem is reached in the stanzas in which the revelation comes to Roland, when the knowledge gained from experience suddenly focusses on this one moment. It is not the moment in the promised land of an Eden but an equally valuable one:

> Burningly it came on me all at once,
>     This was the place! those two hills on the right
>     Crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight;
> While to the left, a tall scalped mountain . . . Dunce,
> Dotard, a-dozing at the very nonce,
>     After a life spent training for the sight! (175-180)

With the end of Roland's quest upon him, whether failure or success, the language is once more sexual in connotation, as he sees hills like animals, and later like giant men. His vision throughout has been strangely anthropomorphic, attributing as it does the baser human characteristics to all the elements of the landscape. (Similar anthropomorphic imagery of landscapes taking on animal features was seen in "By the Fire-side" and "The Englishman in Italy," above. But there the descriptions depicted beauty more than the grotesque, although that element always hovers close beneath the surface.)

The tower which Childe Roland seeks and finds has the blindness of ignorance, yet it is this tower for which he has left the main thoroughfare and risked everything. He acted of his freewill, although he later feels trapped. Philip Raisor suggests that there was a "counterpart," a White Tower which Roland, in leaving the path and following the old cripple's directions, deliberately forfeits.[21] Why, we may ask, if the Dark Tower itself has nothing to reveal? In appearance, although "without a counterpart," it is singularly nondescript, assuming little more visual significance than the tower the lovers pass by in "By the Fire-side," or "the strange square black turret / With never a door, / Just a loop to admit the quick lizards," which can be seen on an island off the coast in "The Englishman in Italy." The square black turret becomes in "Childe Roland" a round brown one.[22]

To comprehend the Dark Tower, we must first return to another kind of tower, the one Protos builds as a monument to art and civilization in "Cleon." Cleon uses this tower as a metaphor for the position of over-cultivated man, as we have seen. The soul, looking from its tower ("the pleasure-house, / Watch-tower and treasure-fortress") craves all the joy in the world. But the flesh allows no greater capacity for joy than when the soul was living on a more earthly, less-advanced level. Thus Cleon's tower, more abstract than actual, represents mankind removing itself from a full life which involved a unity of body and soul. Man's imperfection and the gap which exists between desire and attainment have been recurring themes in all the canon, whether in the life of the painter Andrea del Sarto, in a love poem such as "Two In the Campagna," or in the religious monologues discussed. On the unconscious level these themes are the problems of the protagonist in "Childe Roland." The tower which Cleon uses as his metaphor, his image, is less visual and "concrete" than the Dark Tower. But in the context of the philosophic argument suggesting as it does the split between body and soul, it is important even as the inverse of Roland's tower, symbolically. All Roland's frustrations and guilt are projected outwards in the "concrete" objects of his landscape. But the tower itself comes to represent the reality of the dream and the atonement of body and soul, through the body. The meaning of the tower, seen as the final frame of the series of photographic negatives which have made up Roland's landscape, will be intently focussed upon in the next section as will be the animal and plant imagery brought thus far into relief.

## C: "A Bad Dream Perhaps"--And A Way Out

For Browning, "Childe Roland" was a dream which he _had_ to write down, much as Coleridge had to write "Kubla Khan." Browning explained that, "The poem came as a kind of dream. I had to write it. . . . I did not know then what I meant beyond that, and I'm sure I don't know

now."[23] In the sense that it is a dream, it arose spontaneously from the poet's unconscious, later to be transformed into words. Even in more consciously inspired poetry, there has proven to be a strong connection between the poet and the dreamer, the artist and the childhood from which dream imagery originates: "Our theory of dreams regards wishes originating in infancy as the indispensable motive force for the formation of dreams."[24] There is double reason, then, to analyze the dream elements of "Childe Roland." At the same time, the poem may be treated as one of the early examples of surrealist art, a form which sprang from the Freudian interpretation of dreams.

Roppen and Sommer, speaking of the new critical approach in their essay on "Childe Roland," write: "That the poem arose in and from a dream, that it draws on subconscious sources is, naturally, an invitation to read its experience in terms of guilt, repression, sexual taboos, and 'displacement.'"[25] Quoting from Cohen and Betty Miller, respectively, the essay continues, "At the core of the poem a nightmare 'guilt' has been found, variously explained as the 'obverse side of the poet's humanity,' or again, as a guilt arising from the poet's failure 'to deliver to mankind the full burden of the message with which he has been entrusted.'"[26] Cohen and Miller have used the psychological framework which dream conveys to impute subconscious feeling and motivation to Browning, as if he suddenly revealed a hidden side of himself, unrecognized by his conscious mind and absent from his other poetry. Melchiori varies this approach somewhat by tracing horrific images in the poems from Pauline onwards. But she falls into the intentional (or unintentional) fallacy when she concludes, after quoting a stanza of "war" imagery from The Ring and the Book:

> This passage and the one from Sordello are, I feel, expansions of the idea contained in "Childe Roland," stanzas xxi and xxii, showing that all Browning's most intensely personal ideas of horror were assembled behind and concentrated in these stanzas: the horror of war, the sense of social guilt, the horror of unchastity, and, above all, the horror of death. . . . Childe Roland is called upon to face everything which most filled Browning with horror: last and not least death itself.[27]

Although my reading may agree at points with Miller and Melchiori's, I propose neither to prove that Browning had overriding aversions to death, unchastity, and war, nor even that Roland's ultimate emotion was fear.[28] I will, as Roppen and Sommer express, work with the "nightmare substance" of the poem, but link the nightmare much more positively than is generally the case with the rebirth, the awakening out of the dream. Although there cannot be total innocence after experience, and although there may always be a spider in the communion cup, the two facets of human experience are compatible, necessarily in contact with one another, just as "Childe Roland" is needed to "explain" the other poetry and be explained in turn by it. Of course the evil which is recognized by Browning in life comes almost to dominate the world of The Ring and the Book, a condition for which Browning was criticized, but which, as we will see, he was able to defend.

Much of the analysis of animal and plant imagery in the preceding chapters has proved quite naturally the value of Freud as an aid in determining the sexual nature of the symbolism. However, one is not limited to such an interpretation, nor need one read into Browning's poems anything that he was unconscious of himself, either aesthetically or psychologically. Freud provided his own justification for the use of the psychoanalysis of dreams to analyze poetry: "The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious. . . . What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied."[29]

The following analysis of "Childe Roland" adheres more to the spirit than to the rule of Freudian analysis, but goes beyond scientific psychological boundaries, to discuss art, religion, and philosophy.

Joseph Baker wrote in his Introduction to a 1947 edition of Browning's poetry:

> Freudian psychology today has found expression in Surrealist art. Can it be said that Browning anticipated this movement? The answer is affirmative. His "Childe Roland" has been claimed as the first Surrealist poem, and, as yet, it is unsurpassed by any contemporary effort.[30]

While I do not wish to claim that the first, and unsurpassed, Surrealist poem is "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,"[31] I feel that to look at the surrealist-dream elements of the imagery in detail will give an added dimension to the poem. The form, then, is surrealistic in its effect; the content is open to psychoanalysis, or, specifically, to dream-analysis. Dreams and poems, especially surrealistic poems, do have similarities, and therefore psychoanalytic reading is doubly appropriate.

Surrealism is the name given to an art movement arising from Freud's interpretation of dreams.[32] What features of the dream proper most concern Browning's poem? Roppen and Sommer write that the "uniqueness of the poem in the Browning canon is due to the compelling force of a dream experience, or of an experience that acted upon the poet's imagination 'as a kind of dream.'"[33] The medium of allegory is not more important, they add, "than the nightmare substance out of which the poem is made."[34] The nightmare substance of this dream, as in any dream, is constituted of images. Since it is Browning's imagery on which this discussion focusses, the next step is to link poetic imagery with dream imagery. If in the more consciously formed poems there is a connection, it is not surprising that in "Childe Roland" the dream and the poem have a common origin, and that the imagery may be approached as imagery in a dream. Herbert Read writes:

> To the plastic objects which we find by the aid of our eyes correspond, on another plane of consciousness, the images found in dreams. The direct use of dream imagery has not been frequent in the past, for the good psychological reason that the conscious mind is a jealous guardian of the secrecy of this world. But now we turn to the dream with the same confidence that formerly men placed in the objective world of sensation, and we weave its reality into the synthesis of our art.[35]

To learn that "poetic inspiration has an exact parallel in dream-formation" is not as new, nor as inclusive, as it seemed to Read.[36] Its validity still exists, however.

In The Interpretation of Dreams Freud writes: "Dreams . . . think predominantly in visual images--but not exclusively. They make use of auditory images as well, and, to a lesser extent, of impressions belonging to the other senses."[37] Browning, we have seen, uses imagery involving all the senses, not visual only. Freud continues that although there are some residual thoughts and ideas, "what are truly characteristic of dreams are only those elements of their content which behave like images, which are more like perceptions, that is, than they are like mnemic presentations."[38] It is useful here to look at some passages under the heading "Dream-Work," including the distinction Freud makes between dream-thoughts and dream-content:

> The dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages. Or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose character and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. The dream-thoughts are immediately comprehensible, as soon as we have learnt them. The dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts. If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error.[39]

Freud considers a dream as a puzzle for which we must find a word or meaning for each component part, rather than as a pictorial composition to be treated as a whole. "Childe Roland" in this context is both a poem which is analogous to a dream, and yet an actual dream too. The component parts, the "pictographic script" or image patterns, must be translated as symbols in poem-analysis as well as in dream-analysis. But the consciousness of the poet, even in this poem, means that the images have an integrity and meaning in themselves. We see, then, that Freud was concerned with the translation problem which was encountered aesthetically in Sordello.[40] He speaks further, on the role of imagery in dreams, of a factor,

> . . . whose share in the transformation of the dream-thoughts into the dream-content is not to be underrated: namely, considerations of representability in the peculiar psychical material of which dreams make use--for the most part, that is, representability in visual images. Of the various subsidiary thoughts attached to the essential dream-thoughts, those will be preferred which admit of visual representation; and the dream-work does not shrink from the effort of recasting unadaptable thoughts into a new verbal form . . . provided that that process facilitates representation and so relieves the psychological pressure caused by constricted thinking.[41]

There are many dream-processes which transform dream-thoughts into dream-content. We have to recognize these processes in order to proceed with the analysis (of dream or poem).

> The dream-thoughts which we first come across. . . often strike us by the unusual form in which they are expressed; they are not clothed in the prosaic language usually employed by our thoughts, but are on the contrary represented symbolically by means of similes and metaphors, in images resembling those of poetic speech.[42]

Thus the figures of speech are already present in dreams; the poet translates them as directly as he can, making his own creative emendations which the layman is not able to do. In Freud's terminology dream-content is known as the manifest content, while dream-thoughts constitute the latent content of dreams. A dream is essentially a regression to a primitive or childhood state. While in sleep, our "repression-resistance" decreases, which has governed the unconscious while awake. The dream which originates in this way is already a compromise structure, but it does allow some of the "repressed instinctual impulses" to obtain expression; censorship is still present, however.[43] Thus the disguised form of the unconscious wishes, in the form of images and visual situations. The latent dream-thoughts which motivated the dream contain or hide the repressed elements; psychoanalysis seeks to unravel what has been repressed.

The foregoing theory of analysis must now be applied to "Childe Roland." We must keep in mind that there is only the poem, to begin with and end. We cannot ask Browning for his free associations for each image or picture in the poem. The primordial beginnings we seek are not those of the poet, but of the poetic elements and the persona. More crucially the links with dream-elements in other of his poems need to be traced, although not "forged" in any way.

Dreams retrace our thoughts regressively to the first sense-impressions. But translating the visual contents back into language is not the next step, since this would have to involve psychological interpretation. We do not know that the original dream-thought was ever expressed in language, and to presume it was is to treat the dream as a cloak hiding the real truth. According to Taylor Stoehr (who has subjected Dickens' novels to analysis partially through their dream elements), "the only truth we have is in the telling of the dream, and it is that telling which we want to understand; interpretation is better viewed as understanding than as unveiling."[44] Such a reservation is a safe one to make, especially in the light of criticism such as Mrs. Melchiori's which tries to force a psychological link between the poet's unconscious and the poem.[45]

Because of the verse form Browning uses to isolate the incidents of the dream, "Childe Roland" may be seen as a kind of surrealist montage or collage.[46] Each verse acts as a "frame," (although sometimes one verse will flow into the next) so that a series of images is presented, each frozen in the instant of time. Simultaneity of events, as is felt in the poem, is also one of the qualities of dream. Although Browning imposes a chronological order on the single pictures, they could all occur at once, or the beginning of the poem could be the end, and *vice-versa*.

In frame I we are dropped on the road with the narrator and the "hoary cripple" *in medias res*, for there is no prologue to a dream. In the midst of this static grouping, dramatic action occurs. This is not unique to the dream-poem, but is a characteristic of all Browning's dramatic monologues. In a painting as grotesque as a Breughel we are given the character of

> That hoary cripple, with malicious eye
> Askance to watch the working of his lie
> On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
> Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored
> Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby. (2-6)

The cripple points with his staff to the frame of that picture, to "that ominous tract which . . . / Hides the Dark Tower" (14-15). And the dreamer moves "acquiescingly" beside the knight, with the inevitability of all action in a dream. The dreamer and the knight are one.

The next sequence of frames flashes back in time to the sickness-unto-death which Roland has experienced in searching without any end in view, either success or failure. He speaks of his "world-wide wandering," the words conveying the drawn-out ennui of the quest. A philosophic, but still visual, metaphor intervenes, of the man on his deathbed. Death is already present by implication before this overt reference to the state of Roland's mind. At the end of this sequence of recall and introspection we are introduced to "The Band" of "knights who to the Dark Tower's search addressed / Their steps . . . "(39-40). These are his brothers, if not literally, at least in spirit, and he is linked to them by strong bonds. Yet as everything in a dream is part of the dreamer, so are the other knights a part of Roland, and he cannot exclude himself from any of their crimes of omission or commission (see stanzas XVI and XVII).

Here a distinction may be made between those images in the poem which are direct "tellings" of dream pictures in language and imagery, and the elements of the poem which are conscious elaborations. There is a process in dream-work called "secondary revision" which comes into play

> . . .after the dream has been presented before consciousness as an object of perception. At that point we treat it as we are in general accustomed to treat the contents of our perception: we fill in gaps and introduce connections, and in doing so are often guilty of gross misunderstandings.[47]

Sometimes this rationalizing process does not take place and we see all the gaps and inconsistencies which form the reality of the dream. However, although Browning has filled in many of the gaps in the dream through his creative art, we cannot accuse him of "misunderstandings" since the artist is both dreamer and dream-teller as one. There is a difference in the quality in some of the imagery which makes the reader feel it may have been added to the manifest dream-content, though there can be no proof.[48] Thus the philosophic interpolation of the protagonist seeing himself as an old man hovering between life and death (stanzas V and VI) is a metaphor, one feels, of secondary elaboration, consciously added. It is nearly the only image or metaphor of the poem, significantly, which is not couched in terminology of animals, plants, or landscape--concrete, natural images.

Stanza VIII, after no transitional phrase in language or action, finds Roland once more back on the "reality" of the path to which he has been falsely, yet with truth, led. The dreary day is at its close, "yet shot one grim / Red leer to see the plain catch its estray"(47-48). Already Roland's repressions are projected in physical, visual form, in the imagery of hunting and trapping. Red is a recurring motif in an otherwise colourless landscape.

In frame IX the dream-surrealism structure becomes more dominant:

> For mark! no sooner was I fairly found
> Pledged to the plain, after a pace, or two,
> Than, pausing to throw backward a last view
> O'er the safe road, 't was gone; grey plain all round . . . .
> (49-52)

Roland's journey is now quite determined; the film cannot be rolled back. From here on we can see quite definitely the self manifest in the objects and landscapes outside itself. Norman O. Brown describes surrealism as "a systematic illumination of the hidden places and a progressive darkening of the rest; a perpetual promenade right in the forbidden zone."[49]

The landscape of "Childe Roland" seems a negation of all other landscapes in poems where the affirmation of life and love is dominant. Freud describes negation as

> . . . a way of taking account of what is repressed; indeed, it is actually a removal of the repression, though not . . . an acceptance of what is repressed . . . . Negation only assists in undoing one of the consequences of repression--namely, the fact that the subject-matter of the image is unable to enter consciousness.[50]

Thus the negative, perverted, qualities with which Roland invests nature have their function in beginning to free him from repressions. The repugnance, sterility, disease of all the plants and animals is perhaps a form of "desexualization," which like sublimation, is a negation of bodily Eros. Everything is concentrated narcissistically within the libido.[51] Yet the dream images, however denuded and barren, are at least the means for the unconscious to affirm the body in spite of sublimations. Roland's ultimate goal is a concrete and positive one, to find the tower, even if he admits earlier in the poem that just to reach the end would be success enough.

That Roland loses the safe road once he steps off it is crucial to his success/failure. For suddenly he is surrounded by "grey plain," a nothingness. Yet upon closer examination the barren tract is seen to have some plant growth, even if it is presented negatively and unnaturally:

> . . . I think I never saw
> Such starved ignoble nature; nothing throve:
> For flowers--as well expect a cedar grove!
> But cockle, spurge, according to their law
> Might propagate their kind. . . . (55-59)

The poet's camera eye moves in for a close-up here, and the impression it makes is one repellent to the dreamer-errant. G. K. Chesterton has called "Childe Roland" a poem "celebrating the poetry of mean landscapes. That sense of scrubbiness in nature, as of a man unshaven, has never been conveyed with this enthusiasm and primeval gusto before." In it we have "a perfect realisation of that eerie sentiment which comes on us . . . on some half-starved common at twilight, or in walking down some grey mean street." It is "the song of the beauty of refuse. . . ."[52] Chesterton's description captures very well the mood of the poem. In his image of the unshaven man he is not far removed from saying that the landscape is like a body. Consider the following lines:

> As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair
> In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud
> Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood. (73-75)

The body is not only unkempt, it is also diseased; in truth it is a wasteland.[53] The process of desexualization is here in evidence, although it may exist, contrarily, along with images of sexual potential.

In dreams, the landscape as body may be either male or female, or hermaphroditic. The landscape in "Childe Roland" is ambiguous, although there are specific male and female images within it, culminating in the symbolism of the tower itself. Of more significance is Roland's exploration , simultaneously, of his inner psyche projected externally into the wasteland, and the components of his own body in the plant and animal forms around him. The landscape is therefore both soul and body for him. He rejects it only to acknowledge, eventually, his total being. Northrop Frye, in reference to Blake, makes a connection between body and spirit, to be developed further in the poem: "The true Ark of God is the human body, as Jesus implied when he identified his body with the temple."[54]

In the eleventh stanza there is a fantasy-regression which turns "Nature" into a figure of guardian and imprisoner:

No! penury, inertness and grimace,
In some strange sort, were the land's portion. "See
Or shut your eyes," said Nature peevishly,
"It nothing skills: I cannot help my case:
'Tis the Last Judgment's fire must cure this place,
Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free." (61-66)

Is Roland one of the prisoners, or is he himself responsible for the imprisonment of the land and the creatures he encounters? In a sense he has entered freely into this land, and can go where he has to. Physical freedom does not mean freewill, of course, and the landscape acts on him to some extent even as he creates it, luring him to the end. In any case the Last Judgment's fire does occur in the last "scene" of the poem to set the prisoners free.

The symbolism of castration is present in the negativity of the next lines:

If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk
Above its mates, the head was chopped; the bents
Were jealous else. (67-69)[55]

The personification of plants in the dream is again a projection of the protagonist's own mood. He continues by asking and answering his own question about the brute who "pashes" out the life of the thick plant leaves--the brute who is to some degree both Mad Tom's "foul fiend" and Caliban's "Setebos." Just as they see things in their own image, so does Roland embody the brute from his own unconscious. For he himself is walking on the ground trod upon by his fellow knights before him. He is stalking his Doppelgänger, who well may be the brute he imagines to have killed the land. Yet here, as in Yeats, "Nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent."[56] Once death is accepted the death-wish can turn into a life-wish. Childe Roland's dream journey, psychologically as well as metaphorically, is a journey from death-in-life to life-in-death, from sickness to wholeness of body and spirit.

The horse in stanzas XIII and XIV becomes a convincing symbol of death and atrophy, and strengthens the imagery of death throughout the poem. Even as we read it this way, however, it must be remembered that anything in a dream may well mean its opposite. The recurrent allusions to death are, through the process of negation, at least the first step towards an affirmation of life, portrayed vividly by Fra Lippo's "mill-horse." (Although it, too, is involved in dying, since that is the end of the life-process.) The horse in "Childe Roland" was suggested by, among other things, a tapestry Browning remembered from his own drawing-room. That tapestry was perhaps the original image he perceived, which later provided the manifest dream-content for this particular dream. Yet one may delve elsewhere, like Melchiori, for possible origins of the horse, such as a short story by Poe.[57] We can never fully analyze the horse outside the dream since the poem is our only guide. Within the poem the horse appears on the surrealist landscape with the suddenness of a dream. However, it fits in with other elements of the landscape. There is the archetypal horse of Revelation, too, not the horse of death, which is white, but "another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword" (vi, 4-8). If Browning's horse was ever a war steed, he has long since been thrust out of service, the devil's service. He is both victim and "brute." Roland "hates" the horse because he sees part of himself in the "brute," and he too suffers, inwardly. If the horse has "sinned," through his desires and instincts (which he also symbolizes) so Roland has sinned, although his own desires are still unconscious and repressed:

> At the very beginning . . . the external world, objects, and what is hated are identical.
>
> In so far as the objects which are presented to it are sources of pleasure, it [the ego] takes them into itself . . . and, on the other hand, it expels whatever within itself becomes a cause of unpleasure. (. . . the mechanism of projection.)[58]

Roland also projects maliciousness onto the hoary cripple, spitefulness and wrath onto the river; sees the willows as a "suicidal throng," the tower "blind as the fool's heart," and the anthropomorphic "hills, like giants at a hunting." The symbols form unconsciously from his own person.

In stanzas XV through XVII we are given a "flash-back" to the fraternity of brother-knights in the wilderness. Childe Roland's first impression of the past as he shuts his eyes and looks inward to his heart is of "happier sights" which will spur him on in his soldier's role. For the basic definition of a dream is that it is "a (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish."[59] (Does Roland really wish for death, then, rather than fear it?) Quite consciously (in the dream) the protagonist wishes for a change of scene from the present harshnesss. However, each image recalled fades out in disillusionment. For the knights he remembers in their former glory ended their days (in Roland's eyes) as traitors and in disgrace:

> Giles then, the soul of honour--there he stands
>     Frank as ten years ago when knighted first.
>     What honest man should dare (he said) he durst.
> Good--but the scene shifts--faugh! What hangman hands
> Pin to his breast a parchment? His own hands
>     Read it. Poor traitor, spit upon and curst! (97-102)

In the stanzas on Cuthbert and Giles a whole lifetime is captured in an instant, and the scene is described as if it were from a play. This also illustrates a process in dreams known as "condensation," or "compression."

> It is this that is mainly responsible for the bewildering impression made on us by dreams. . . . In the process of condensation . . . every psychical interconnection is transformed into an intensification of its ideational content.[60]

This "intensification" is equally characteristic of poetry. Freud expands on the work of condensation:

> Dreams are brief, meagre and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of the dream-thoughts. If a dream is written out it may perhaps fill half a page. The analysis setting out the dream-thoughts underlying it may occupy six, eight or a dozen times as much space.[61]

Browning, as the artist creating a poem out of a dream, has already expanded the dream somewhat, by adding certain connectives and giving the dream a modicum of pattern or logic. However, this poem still consists largely of the basic perceptions and actions of the dream, if we compare it with the other dramatic monologues.

Cuthbert and Giles, then, are judged by their peers and found wanting. Yet the judgment against Christ, a "traitor" too, also resulted in him being "spit upon and cursed." If man is fallen, as Adam, the first man, he is made alive in Christ, the second man.[62] So Roland's fate, if it be that of his brothers, need not be called failure and disgrace. He is, at this stage, still blind to the real nature of his quest; thus he can rationalize, "Better this present than a past like that" (103). He separates himself from his peers, as well as from his environment. On the other hand, the projected guilt of these "brother-knights" is closely connected with Roland's own guilt. He calls them traitors, yet earlier in stanza VII he has expressed a wish "just to fail as they"—"The Band." He perhaps fears that he has traitorous impulses and desires within himself.

With the irrationality of a dream the scene shifts to "the darkening path again," with nothing to be seen or heard. But suddenly, "something in the dismal flat / Came to arrest my thoughts and change their train" (107-108). A change of scene in the surrealist landscape indicates a change of mood. For in the dream, time and space do not exist in a real, but in a surreal, sense. They appear in the telling of the dream, or the poem, as embroidery to the manifest dream. Thus the river in stanza XIX appears as sudden and unexpected as a serpent, a symbol which brings to mind innocence and experience, paradise and a fallen world. In the same stanza there is an allusion to the devil in the "fiend's glowing hoof"; the river itself seems to be activated by the fires of hell. The river can be an archetypal symbol, like the hidden path of Roland's quest, for the unconscious. The inferno-like overtones sometimes make his journey appear as an underworld experience, as if he must make his way back from the earth's womb, to be born again into this world.[63] Again, the labyrinths of hell in physical terms would represent, psychologically, the meanderings of the unconscious mind. There are many images of imprisonment within the poem, too.

In stanza XXII the protagonist enters the swirling river to experience a baptism, a death by drowning. The tactile quality of Browning's imagery is manifest in the "feel" of the "dead man's cheek" which Roland fears to step on, and in the baby he hears shrieking when he probes a water-rat with his spear. (Archetypally rats symbolize the underworld and disease.) This stanza evokes Roland's (and our) worst nightmares, for the baby and the dead man are two phases of man's life.

The dead man may symbolize simultaneously Roland's fellow knights, his father, himself; that is, fear of fratricide, patricide, and suicide.[64] (In Sordello, as was noted, it is the mother who is dug up out of the ground by the warrior's spur.) This passage should be quoted fully for its effect:

> . . . while I forded,--good saints, how I feared
>     To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,
>     Each step, or feel the spear I thrust to seek
> For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard!
> --It may have been a water-rat I speared,
>     But ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek. (121-126)

In psychological terms a dream operates like fantasy. Both seek unconsciously to return to childhood, to a wish which has been long repressed. Fantasy is the mechanism whereby the body-ego becomes a soul,and it is only a "substitute-gratification" for the instinctual demands of the id, which seeks bodily erotic union with the world.[65] The fantasy is regressive, which would explain the quest in "Childe Roland" returning to what has happened before, substituting the past for the present. During his trip through the unconscious, then, Roland is passing all the stages of his life; and his imagined killing of a baby or man symbolizes the desire to kill his old self to leave him free for the present. In this way the old cripple may be a projection of Roland's own crippled psyche which he both fears and hates. In recognizing this hatred, even in disguised form, he shows readiness to step out into the wilderness which will contain a cure. By negation, fantasy identifies past and present so that all time is one. Behind negation and repression is a hidden affirmation of himself, which only emerges after the experience and the apocalypse. In finding himself, identifying with the landscape, he is replacing the lost objects of childhood; the images he perceives were already present in his unconscious waiting for rediscovery.

A new shift in scene occurs, and Roland finds himself on the "other bank" in one swift movement. He hopes for a "better country" but finds evidence of struggle and war in the dank soil, and imagines toads and wild-cats circling madly in strange traps:

> The fight must so have seemed in that fell cirque.
>     What penned them there, with all the plain to choose?
>     No foot-print leading to that horrid mews,
> None out of it. Mad brewage set to work
> Their brains, no doubt, like galley-slaves the Turk
>     Pits for his pastime, Christians against Jews. (133-138)

The circle represents the centre or focal point of the nightmare thus far. Other creatures before Roland have encountered the trap. The wild-cat, like the lynx in "Karshish," is symbolic of unleashed psychical forces. Freud speaks most specifically on such symbolism:

> Wild beasts are as a rule employed by the dream-work to represent passionate impulses of which the dreamer is afraid, whether they are his own or those of other people. (It then needs only a slight displacement for the wild beasts to come to represent the people who are possessed by these passions. We have not far to go from here to cases in which a dreaded father is represented by a beast of prey or a dog or wild horse--a form of representation recalling totemism.) It might be said that the wild beasts are used to represent the libido, a force dreaded by the ego and combated by means of repression. It often happens, too, that the dreamer separates off his neurosis, his "sick personality," from himself and depicts it as an independent person.[66]

The latter part of this statement of course verifies much of what we have been discovering about Roland's journey through his unconscious.

The toad recalls "the toad in the communion cup" where it symbolized evil in the midst of innocence. Both creatures, wild-cat and toad, are being punished in Roland's vision, as is the gaunt red horse, and as are Caliban and his fellow-creatures. No physical barrier is in evidence to prevent escape onto the broad plain. Therefore there is again the nightmare situation (which is also psychotic) of paralysis in the face of danger. A war, perhaps due to the unleashing of repressions, is suggested to have taken place, but its existence and cause are always ambiguous. If the toads or wild-cats are so frustrated by captivity that they struggle even against themselves, they symbolize another aspect of Roland's psyche, his libido, his "sick personality," as Freud indicated. They are also part of the theme of mutilation, images of which are recurrent in the poem (see stanza XXII):

> . . . for Jung, to be possessed by the unconscious (that is, by whims, manias and obsessions)is nothing short of being torn up into chaotic multiplicity, as, for example, the breaking of a rock into many fragments. Mutilations of the body, the prising apart of what is united, are so many symbols of analogous situations in the spirit.[67]

In Browning's poetics we have noted the fragmentation of perceptions resulting from their transference into language. Yet underlying all is a desire for wholeness, for oneness, both aesthetically and in Christian terms. The two states seem to be an unreconcilable dialectic, yet disunity and unity must exist in tension together.

Here, as in so many frames of the poem, there is a sense of an omnipotent power determining and controlling the environment, a power ascribed as blind and mad, or named a fool(who makes things only to mar them) and a fiend. Certainly the knight finds himself at the heart of the surrealist nightmare in the vivid pictures projected through these stanzas. More relics of war are found nearby:

> And more than that--a furlong on--why, there!
>     What bad use was that engine for, that wheel,
>     Or brake, not wheel--that harrow fit to reel
> Men's bodies out like silk? with all the air
> Of Tophet's tool, on earth left unaware,
>     Or brought to sharpen its rusty teeth of steel.(139-144)

The sense of groping for the "right" word which Browning conveys here exemplifies one stage in the process of embodying dream in language. As well as man-made instruments of war, the weapons suggest god-made instruments of torture. Tophet is symbolic of death, as in Jeremiah xix, 11: "Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again: and they shall bury them in Tophet, till there be no place to bury." Freud also considered that all machinery, weapons, and tools occurring in dreams were phallic symbols.[68]

After a speeded-up series of images portraying more diseased or dying forms on the landscape, grotesque in their appearance (as the "gay and grim" blotches and formations on the soil like boils), Roland reaches the tree of knowledge, in which case the gaping mouth could be a serpent's mouth, since the serpent is commonly associated with the tree, its roots and branches.[69] However, all the common associations of the tree symbol seem to be negated by Roland. Consider the following attributes, for example:

> In its most general sense, the symbolism of the tree denotes the life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality.[70]

But like all the other objects in the dream landscape, the oak tree shows the underside of the expected positive qualities which are represented in such a poem as "By the Fire-side." Although Roland appears, in the manifest dream-content, to be projecting his own death-wish onto the "palsied oak," whose gaping mouth picks up a similar motif in the description of the cripple, Freud tells us that "Dreams show a special tendency to reduce two opposites to a unity or to represent them as one thing. Dreams even take the liberty . . . of representing any element whatever by the opposite wish. . . ."[71]

At this juncture in the interminable plain, where one horror succeeds another, Roland has nearly given up hope. As in a dream, no matter how far he journeys he seems "just as far as ever from the end!" (Also, the time which seems so long is probably very brief in terms of the actual dream span.) The horizon is an infinity away, and the hero senses a feeling of loss and abandonment, symbolism of which is similar to that for the "lost object" we are told, with parallels to the symbolism of death and resurrection.[72] In the midst of Roland's despair a black bird suddenly appears to point the way:

> At the thought,
> A great black bird, Apollyon's bosom-friend,
> Sailed past, nor beat his wide wing dragon-penned
> That brushed my cap--perchance the guide I sought.
> (159-162)

The bird in this passage has multiple meanings, all interlocking. Although he is associated with Apollyon, the devil, he is taken as a good omen, with none of the maliciousness of Roland's first guide, the old cripple. "They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon" (Revelation ix,11). A bird black in colour "is associated with the idea of beginning," with "demiurgic power," and is considered a messenger because of its flight.[73] Roland's bird has wings "dragon-penned," that is, pinioned like a dragon. The dragon has particular relevance as a recurring motif throughout the Browning canon.[74] Mrs. Melchiori theorizes that in this poem the landscape is a wasteland which " has been laid waste by a dragon." She continues, "This monster never actually appears in the poem, but the atmosphere of horror and fear are [sic] the more convincing because we know that it is there. For the unseen is always more terrifying than the seen. . . ."[75] She considers the first part of the poem to be linked with the Andromeda myth: "His heroes were Perseus and the Christian equivalent, St. George. Most of his poetry is written in the guise of Perseus, the poet of reason--but 'Childe Roland' was a poem written by the monster. It is, essentially, a poem of hate."[76] The dragon may have taken over completely, as Mrs. Melchiori claims, but it is risky to identify Browning himself with this "thing of darkness" who has written the poem. And why is Perseus synonomous with reason?

The Perseus-Andromeda myth and Browning's variations on it are so important in his work that the possible implications the myth holds for "Childe Roland" should not be overlooked. In The Ring and the Book as will be seen the ambiguities inherent in the myth are used to their fullest extent, and all of the many variations are present in one monologue or another.[77] In Browning's very first depiction of the myth, his description in Pauline of Polidor di Caravaggio's Andromeda in an engraving over his desk, the myth is given perverse undertones. In the "straight" myth Perseus sees Andromeda and instantly falls in love, just as she is to be devoured by a female sea-monster. In the inverted version the goddess Astarte (a demonic Andromeda) seduces Perseus with her beauty. In the original Palestinian or Syrian icon depicting the myth, "the jewelled, naked Andromeda, standing chained to a rock, is Aphrodite, or Ishtar, or Astarte, the lecherous Sea-goddess, 'ruler of men.'"[78] She is not awaiting rescue but has been bound there by Marduk (who, mounted on a white horse, killed her emanation, Tiamat, a sea-serpent) to keep her from further mischief. Although Browning worships his Andromeda as a damsel of highest purity to be rescued, as the princess in the tower, it is true that the feelings of the speaker in Pauline, of Browning in his "rescue" of Elizabeth Barrett, and of Caponsacchi towards Pompilia, contain degrees of sexual ambiguity. The Perseus story for Browning regularly carries tones of guilt and moral inversion, tones already dominant in "Childe Roland."

Caravaggio's painting concentrates on Andromeda herself. She is waiting for a god to "come in thunder from the stars" to rescue her, as the speaker in Pauline feels "secure" will happen. She is naked "As she awaits the snake on the wet beach." The snake of course has long mythical affinity with woman's loss of innocence and her seductive qualities. Andromeda's hair is "lifted and spread by the salt-sweeping breeze, / And one red beam. . . /Resting upon her eyes and hair. . ." (560-562). She sounds a very wild creature, in contrast to her Victorian depiction by Lord Leighton, for example. The "red beam" seems a harbinger of the "grim / Red leer" the dying sun emits, happy to see Roland caught by the plain, and the same "dying sunset," as if time had not passed, just before Roland faces the "sheet of flame" which marks his finish. So, perhaps, would Andromeda-Astarte entrap her rescuer.

In "Childe Roland" there are many of the ingredients of the myth. Roland is an apprentice knight bound on a quest and having to overcome many dangers, for him spiritual ones. He comes on foot, and not from the sky, to a "Dark Tower" which is like the great rock to which Andromeda is chained. There is no woman at the Dark Tower, because it is himself that Roland has to save. He must free himself from the beast who has trod the same plain. Since no beast actually materializes--indeed, nothing molests Roland during his quest-- it seems safe to say that the beast is within the knight himself. In that case, Mrs. Melchiori's claim that this poem is "written by the monster" might have some validity if we substituted "dreamed" for "written." Andromeda may not be the symbol of truth waiting to be rescued which DeVane makes her out to be.[79] She may as easily symbolize suppressed desires. In her nakedness, of course, she also affirms the "significance of flesh." The whole landscape of "Childe Roland" is body, sometimes male, sometimes female, until the tower-phallus at the quest's culmination.

_Pauline_ and "Childe Roland" have much more imagery in common than that of the Perseus-Andromeda strain. Without going too deeply into Browning's first work, I want to point out a few of the parallels which help establish the place of "Childe Roland" in Browning's canon. John Stuart Mill's unpublished criticism of _Pauline_ which Browning took so much to heart referred to the extreme "morbid self-consciousness" displayed by the writer.[80] Never again did Browning allow his personal soul to be bared for public scrutiny; he employed from that date on a dramatic technique. _Pauline_ is the young poet's biography, his confession, and in it he is consciously pursuing the demonic side of himself. One of his phases is to indulge in extreme egoism, pride, and self-worship:

> My powers were greater: as some temple seemed
> My soul, where nought is changed and incense rolls
> Around the altar, only God is gone
> And some dark spirit sitteth in his seat. (469-472)

The soul is a temple or altar inhabited by a dark spirit; symbolically it is like the dark tower which comes to be Roland's body, inseparable from his soul. As the speaker in Pauline passes through the temple, troops of shadows kneel to him in worship, call him king, tell him to worship himself. He asks to be borne far away from the past, and is carried "O'er deserts, towers and forests" (480). At this hedonistic phase of his life he resolves to wear himself out in living: "every hour / I would make mine, and die" (503-504). Old age is abhorrent to him.

A second most significant passage in terms of its imagery is that at the end of the poem, addressed to Shelley, and showing at least awareness of the need to battle with death:

> Sun-treader, I believe in God and truth
> And love; and as one just escaped from death
> Would bind himself in bands of friends to feel
> He lives indeed, so, I would lean on thee!
> Thou must be ever with me, most in gloom
> If such must come, but chiefly when I die,
> For I seem, dying, as one going in the dark
> To fight a giant: but live thou for ever,
> And be to all what thou hast been to me! (1020-28)

Roland too is seeking atonement through and with his brother knights as he faces hills anthropomorphically seen as giants hunting him down. The affirmation is of a different kind in the later poem. Has the demonic self of the young poet of Pauline finally surfaced again, only this time in a dream, allowing Browning to express more unconsciously, safely, and dramatically, those youthful obsessions long repressed? A dream such as Childe Roland's, or Browning's, is healthy, not "morbid"; frees the psyche, the soul, even while its images are of traps; brings life, even though its imagery denotes death.

In stanza XXVIII, "perchance" because of the bird, there is another of those unexplainable shifts in scene. Where there was only plain, there now appear mountains,

> --with such name to grace
> Mere ugly heights and heaps now stolen in view.
> How thus they had surprised me,--solve it, you!
> How to get from them was no clearer case. (165-168)

The finger is pointed at the reader, and by means of various clues scattered throughout the poem he is invited to solve the case, the riddle, or maze. "For man," as Blake says, "has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."[81] All of Browning's personae, at one time or another, are striving to see out of the caverns they have made for themselves; consider Caliban, for example.

Stanza XXIX gives conscious recognition of the dream-state of Childe Roland, for as the mountains close around him he half recognizes "some trick / Of mischief happened to me, God knows when-- / In a bad dream perhaps" (169-171). There is a moment for Roland, then, of déjà vu. Also, since this is a dream in which he moves, the image is a regressive one, a remembrance of a dream, within a dream.[82] He once more comes to a barrier, the edge of the picture, where ends "Progress this way." The trap, which he has long projected, becomes real for him--and for the reader. There has been a "click," one more frame, which has transformed and sharpened a slightly out-of-focus, indefinable picture. Roland is in the den with the other animals, be they toads and wild-cats, or fragments of himself.

The "click" in one sense signifies the awakening from the dream, and from death-in-life. Even Roland's sensual being is more alive, for in stanza XXX he recognizes "Burningly" that this is the place. The climax of the poem, or dream, and the end of Roland's quest, are both imminent. The imagery of impotence is countered here by the male symbolism of two bulls, but the mountain is still "scalped" like the rest of the denuded landscape. There is no logical reason for the familiarity of these landmarks, but the dream conditions again offer the explanation. The end comes on Roland as if he had been asleep, instead of alert. But, strangely, there is no spectacular vision; instead, the unimportant takes on great significance. Roland finds himself in a gorge or valley, and no longer on the flat plain. The gorge here suggests total involvement in the unconscious and the forces of evil, in the lower regions of the earth. At the same time it symbolizes the "crack in the conscious life through which the inner pattern of the individual psyche . . . may be glimpsed."[83]

What does Roland discover at the heart of his dark journey, within the gorge?

> What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?
> The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart
> Built of brown stone, without a counterpart
> In the whole world . . . . (181-184)

The tower must seem unique to the dreamer, because it is himself, his body that he has discovered. Since "soul" for Browning means awareness or consciousness attained through the body, the tower begins to reconcile the body-soul duality. It is in this poem the inverse of the tower in "Cleon" or in Tennyson's "Palace of Art." Cirlot's Dictionary of Symbols explains the connection between tower and man.

> Finally we would point to the analogy between the tower and man: for just as the tree is closer to the human figure than are the horizontal forms of animals, so, too, is the tower the only structural form distinguished by verticality: windows at the topmost level, almost always large in size, correspond to the eyes and mind of man.[84]

But the Dark Tower is squat, not tall, and "blind as the fool's heart," the same fool who has been wreaking havoc on the land.[85] Once again the symbolism seems an inversion of the more positive meanings of tower.

One of the dream processes, along with condensation and secondary elaboration to which I have referred, is known as displacement. It helps explain the almost anticlimactic appearance of the tower, its basic insignificance from a visual point of view. Freud thus describes dream-displacement in the following passage:

> It thus seems plausible to suppose that in the dream-work a psychical force is operating which on the one hand strips the elements which have a high psychical value of their intensity, and on the other hand, by means of overdetermination, creates from elements of low psychical value new values, which afterwards find their way into the dream-content. If that is so, a transference and displacement of psychical intensities occurs in the process of dream-formation, and it is as a result of these that the difference between the text of the dream-content and that of the dream-thoughts comes about.[86]

Dream-displacement is the result of censorship and causes distortion of the original dream-wish in the unconscious, and the dream-thought. Elements in dream-thoughts which even make their way into the dream "must escape the censorship imposed by resistance."[87] We know that we cannot provide a total analysis of the poem as dream. But it may be supposed that such images as the stiff blind horse, the old cripple, the palsied oak, found their way more easily into the dream than the Dark Tower, and therefore, in length of description and visual appearance, have a more predominant place through displacement than the tower itself. But they all build up to form the tower, since we have already determined that they were projections of Roland, parts of his body. It may be supposed, then, that the predominant descriptions of a deathly landscape are subordinate, in the end, to the discovery of the Self and the affirmation, condensed into the final stanzas, of life even in the midst of death.

The vision which Roland has in the gorge of his own soul/body has to come from within. The tower as a "concrete" object, the "thing" itself, stands quite literally at the end of his quest. It is a phallic symbol on a rather denuded landscape, "body" of land. But in a spiritual sense the tower represents the possibility of a new beginning. Cirlot explains that "the sudden appearance of a castle in the path of a wanderer is like the sudden awareness of a spiritual pattern."[88] It accomplishes an end to fatigue, and the achievement of salvation. Roland's Dark Tower has more sinister overtones, but the vision in the last stanzas is certainly apocalyptic in implication.

Although Roland's eyes are at last opened, this does not happen until the penultimate moment. He has trained for a lifetime to recognize the tower, his reason tells him,yet identification comes only when retreat is completely cut off, as the metaphor (secondary elaboration) suggests:

> . . . The tempest's mocking elf
> Points to the shipman thus the unseen shelf
> He strikes on, only when the timbers start. (184-186)

The real danger begins, paradoxically, with the first signs of hope.

The surrealist landscape surrounding the tower is given us in a final series of vivid and dramatic scenes. Why could Roland not see the tower sooner?

> . . . why, day
> Came back again for that! before it left,
> The dying sunset kindled through a cleft:
> The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay
> Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay,--
> "Now stab and end the creature--to the heft!"(187-192)

Roland is now the animal, the "game," while the hills appear to him as hunters, which, passively directing some other force, wish to see him stabbed to death. Although this moment of his apparent demise, as a victim, seems the antithesis of the incarnational moment of love, epitomized by the final ecstatic moments David senses in all nature at the end of "Saul," it is a moment of revelation, like the apocalypse. "The real apocalypse comes, not with the vision of a city or kingdom, which would still be external, but with the identification of the city and kingdom with one's own body."[89] In this sense, the real apocalypse comes for Childe Roland when the dismembered body of the landscape takes its final shape, the Dark Tower, or risen body. The implications are as much religious as psychological; the physical symbolism as much resurrection as erection.

In a whirling vortex which embraces all the senses, Roland is surrounded by a noise which "tolled / Increasing like a bell" in which he hears,

> Names in my ears
> Of all the lost adventurers my peers,--
> How such a one was strong, and such was bold,
> And such was fortunate, yet each of old
> Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.
> (194-198)

The bell tolls for him, as well as for the union of all his peers in their common loss. Roland stands ready to accept "death's minute of night" (for of such nature is the infinite moment here) in the fiery "living frame" of the mountains, made up of the knights' faces, his archetypal family of man:

> There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met
> To view the last of me, a living frame
> For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
> I saw them and I knew them all. (199-202)

That Browning takes his imagery ("living frame") from the medium of painting is no accident if we consider his strong affinity for the visual arts. Roland comes face to face with himself in the guise of all his brother-knights, then, much in the way that Arthur's knights are mirror images of himself in Idylls of the King. It takes a death by fire to heal, ultimately, a diseased land or body, to make whole what has been rent. The death of all life in the landscape is transformed by the flames in the final scene. But Browning does not carry the apocalyptic vision through to show a rebirth of the wasteland. Psychologically, Roland's life-journeying has been a dream, and he has now to die out of this dream, to awaken. We are given no view of the future.

The theme and imagery of life over death have been seen in poems from Dramatic Lyrics and Romances onwards. It was the old Gipsy in "The Flight of the Duchess" who described death as awakening from life's dream. Roma King makes the following comparison between the two poems: "Both are spiritual journeys: the one depicts the happy beginning of a journey; the other, the journey itself. 'Childe Roland' takes up from a different point of view where the earlier poem leaves off."[90] One is sequential and told by an outsider, the other is direct experience told in symbols and without reference to logic. In "Flight of the Duchess" specific sexual imagery from nature is used to describe the gipsies and to symbolize the life-force, the need to escape the dream-nightmare immobility of "civilized" life within the court. The Duchess, like the lovers in "The Eve of St. Agnes," is given no guarantee of how her journey will end, but she will at least be alive during its progress. Childe Roland, on the other hand, needs to take a negative journey before a positive outcome can even be projected. Both characters have to show the same willingness to overcome death.

Childe Roland blows in his own Last Judgment and brings the poem full circle to its title:

And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
And blew. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."(202-205)

The trumpet shall sound and we shall all be changed in the twinkling of an eye. Roland is "changed" by finding himself, at the same instant that he becomes united with the "body" of his fellow knights. The surrealist landscape burns up in a holocaust. What follows we do not know. Browning's poem ends, ambiguously, at the moment of confrontation with death, the supreme liberator.[91] That the moment of truth comes with the protagonist's willingness to face death is the traditional interpretation of the poem. When Browning was asked if the central purpose of "Childe Roland" could be expressed as "He that endureth to the end shall be saved," he replied, "Yes, just about that."[92] There is a wealth of irony, and truth, in this seeming understatement.

Approaching the truth has proved more complex. If the moment of triumph is only implied, the implications take on great significance in the framework of the dream. By blowing the "slug-horn," a lowly last trump, Childe Roland releases the prisoners, including himself, even as they are immersed in the destructive element, the fiery furnace. Norman O. Brown writes of death that,

> The death instinct is reconciled with the life instinct only in a life which is not repressed, which leaves no "unlived lines" in the human body, the death instinct then being affirmed in a body which is willing to die. And, because the body is satisfied, the death instinct no longer drives it to change itself and make history, and therefore, as Christian theology divined, its activity is in eternity.[93]

Eros may supplant Thanatos, then, when Childe Roland's quest comes full circle.

The risen body, with its darker manifestations, which is symbolized by the Dark Tower, is the body reconciled with death. Roland reaches this state through his willingness to face the broken, dismembered body of himself in the landscape of his quest. If dreams can reconcile opposites, contain tensions in dialectic, then Roland may be said to have drawn all the contradictions of the unconscious mind into the open plain, and there to have begun the process of recognition and reconciliation. The body has come together only from its fragmented parts. The horn blows out the Dionysian "witches' brew" symbolized by the brute or beast which has been responsible for the state of the land.[94] For in Nietzchean terms Dionysus is needed to liberate the life force: "Dionysus, the mad god, breaks down the boundaries; releases the prisoners; abolishes repression; and abolishes the principium individuationis, substituting for it the unity of man and the unity of man with nature."[95] Once Roland is united in himself and with nature--and surely such oneness is exactly what Browning "images" at the moment in his poems when Incarnation (divine) or incarnation through human love[96] becomes most meaningful for his personae --then he is freed from his original repressions and sublimations (symbolized by Apollo, if we remember Sordello's dream-state). It is repressed desires which are responsible for guilt and aggression, the "witches' brew." Apollonian form contains the dream, but it exists in tension with Dionysus who releases the dream, embodies it in flesh, brings the individual images towards an incarnational oneness. The emphasis in all Browning's poetry is the very emergence of the soul through, or into, the body.

To lose one's life in order to find it is a dictum for many of Browning's personae. Earlier the passage directed to Shelley about facing the giant death, in Pauline, was quoted. It seems relevant to note here one of Browning's concluding comments on that poet from his Essay on Shelley: "I shall say what I think--had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians. . . . The preliminary step to follow Christ, is the leaving the dead to bury their dead--not clamoring on his doctrine for an especial solution of difficulties which are referable to the general problem of the universe."[97] Childe Roland had experienced on his weary wanderings a death-like state, but it would seem that he undauntedly leaves "the dead to bury their dead" by the poem's ending. The poem has no direct Christian implications, but many covert symbols and messages emerge, especially in terms of the interconnection between body and soul, nature and spirit in man.

Roland "acts out" what Caliban, for example, represses except in his monologue. Caliban's character remains unchanged at the end of his monologue, which is the case with most of the personae in the monologues and lyrics. The dreamer who is the protagonist of "Childe Roland" has, however, immersed himself so totally in physical experience of what was repressed that he is a new being at the poem's end: his soul is awakened through its fearlessness in the face of death. After all, the poem does have the orthodox meaning ascribed to it by members of the Browning Society. But there is a multitude of psychological implications before the positive ending is reached. And the ambiguity of the quest does mean that it could be lived over and over again; like the "infinfte moment"achieved through love, not death, the fulfillment is not static and absolute.

Childe Roland is freed from self and from the cavern or gorge of mountains symbolizing his psyche. His vision of nature, manifest in the imagery, is then counterpointed by, and the negation of, the worlds of the other personae. He achieves a new kind of consciousness and awareness, borne out of feeling the life-force or process behind the death-wish or form. Of such consciousness is Browning's optimism constituted; it is hard won, not an easily acquired virtue.

Fra Lippo Lippi, unlike most of the personae, claims that life is too big "to pass for a dream." (Some of the other personae do learn this in time, however.) He defies life, as does Childe Roland,and plays out "In pure rage!" the fooleries at which he is caught. He makes a most arresting claim, both artistically and psychologically, for the instincts. Yet his "old mill-horse" immersed in sensual pleasure is only one side of the pleasure-reality principle, the other side conceivably seen in Childe Roland's gaunt and suffering horse.[98] We saw that tension and guilt are not fully absolved for Lippi, either, however liberated he seeks to appear.

Absolution comes in the "infinite" moments when time crosses eternity, in love's "good minute," in a brief moment of artistic unity, and potentially in the holocaust which perhaps preludes a Second Coming. The holocaust followed the long moment when nightmare images became foreground. These moments, which need repetition, are made out of every living animal and plant image in the landscape of the poems. Childe Roland acts as the archetype or embodiment of every Browning persona who has been seen in the context of this world, which is not a dream. But a much larger archetypal pattern is worked out, using nearly all the animal and plant images and their accompanying themes thus far discovered, in The Ring and the Book, to which we now turn.

# CHAPTER IV

## "A DRAGON BORN OF ROSE-DEW"

> Why, here you have the awfulest of crimes
> For nothing! Hell broke loose on a butterfly!
> A dragon born of rose-dew and the moon!
> Yet here is the monster! (IV,1600-03)
>
> For you, too, hast thy problem hard to solve--
> How so much beauty is compatible
> With so much innocence! (IX, 766-768)

### A: Introduction

In the preceding chapters we have seen the development of an aesthetics for Browning's use of imagery, and for the problem of using language to contain the infinite in the finite. Specific plant and animal imagery has been introduced illustrating the psychological and aesthetic importance of the "natural object" in the major monologues and lyrics. The emergent images and themes have then been channelled into a close exposition of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," which examined the effect of dream on the imagery. Gradually a secondary microcosmic world of plant and animal has emerged into the foreground, or upper level of consciousness, acting as commentary upon the world of civilized man represented by Browning's dramatis personae who love, think, act, and create each according to his personal awareness.

In The Ring and the Book the previous problems, images, concepts, and psychological revelations amalgamate. For in some measure this major poem, although not the directly subjective "R.B. poem" asked of Browning by Elizabeth Barrett,[1] does represent a fusion of the "parts," the single poems, into the "whole," a structure of twelve monologues. Within the larger framework, however, the "parts" are quite as important as their sum. We are going to examine a great many parts of the poem, in the forms of those "staunch" images which serve "at every turn!" (to quote Guido).

The first of these staunch images are of course the title ones, repeated in Books I and XII, the "Ring" and the "Book," two very concrete objects which indeed become most "adequate symbols." These symbols for the transmutation of the raw material into the work of art have received enormous critical attention since the poem's publication in 1868-69; as well, there are numerous books and articles on the poem's overall structure.[2] The ring metaphor in a broader sense is a recurring one in Browning's cycle of volumes and poems. Within the ten interior monologues rings and circles are frequently used to link characters and action.

In Book I, Browning speaks of seeing how the tragic piece "had run this round from Rome to Rome--" in other words, how the tragedy had moved full circle. The ring image overlaps with one of the early instances of animal imagery in the poem, as the poet sees Violante and Pietro make their escape from the Franceschini:

> Break somehow through the satyr-family
> (For a grey mother with a monkey-mien,
> Mopping and mowing, was apparent too,
> As, confident of capture, all took hands
> And danced about the captivesin a ring). . . .(I,570-575)

But they leave their "loved one" with "haters" who revenge themselves on Pompilia, in a setting envisaged by Browning: "all was sure, / Fire laid and cauldron set, the obscene ring traced, / The victim stripped and prostrate: what of God?" (I,580-582) Into the ring springs

Caponsacchi, a veritable Saint George, cleaving the cloud, quenching their cauldron, bearing "away the lady in his arms, / Saved for a splendid minute and no more" (I,587-588). Although no longer encircled, Pompilia sees the circle of the Comparini trap rising around her, during one of the stops in her flight with Caponsacchi:

> I saw the old boundary and wall o' the world
> Rise plain as ever round me, hard and cold,
> As if the broken circlet joined again,
> Tightened itself about me with no break. . . . (VII,1546-49)

Later in her monologue, Pompilia, having claimed Caponsacchi as the angel of truth who saved her, makes this deathbed affirmation:

> I am safe!
> Others may want and wish, I wish nor want
> One point o' the circle plainer, where I stand
> Traced round about with white to front the world.
> (VII,1643-46)

She has become her own still point in a turning world.

The circle metaphors surrounding Guido have quite different connotations, and focus on the guillotine collar and the embrace of the marriage ring. The latter becomes the coils of the snake who is Pompilia (and her family). Guido murders her, breathing relief that,

> . . . unbrokenly lay bare
> Each taenia that sucked me dry of juice,
> At last outside me, not an inch of ring
> Left now to writhe about and root itself
> I' the heart all powerless for revenge! (XI, 1605-09)

However, Pompilia has been the viper to survive for a time, as Half-Rome tells us: "Writhes still through every ring of her, poor wretch " (II, 1446),as a torment to Guido who could not slay her outright. The ring thus is transformed into a central animal image--the snake.

Apart from the long complex analogy of the ring as the completed poem, there is another analogy in Book I of the artist, on a lower level, as God making the bare clay (the facts) become alive, incarnate. "I fused my live soul and that inert stuff," says the poet, "Before attempting smithcraft" (I, 469-470). Thus the process is first an internal one before it is translated into poetry. Whatever the reader may eventually bring together as his own truth, there is an absolute truth for Browning from the outset, overriding all claims that he is a relativist in this poem (as well as elsewhere).[3]

The poet enters the base metal, then, and turns the Yellow Book into The Ring and the Book. The finished product is somehow the Truth. However, that word is used in so many contexts for such a variety of motives throughout the poem, that it becomes one of the deceptive words whose meaning slides from it. No one (except perhaps the Pope) can understand Truth without translating it into its component parts.[4] There needs to be a re-evaluation of the poem's basic subject: it is a poem as much about process, the effect of time, as it is about, simply, Truth, or right and wrong.

The truth, however, as he perceived it, genuinely moved Browning's spirit in the time it took him to walk home through the streets of Florence, reading the Yellow Book en route. But what happened through intuition he knows cannot be taught in a single word or moment. He could say "Pompilia is innocent, Guido guilty" and if that were the central truth he need go no further. But the meaning is in the medium of poetry covering a multitude of exigencies, levels, characters, nuances. In a sense, everything does happen simultaneously in the poem, or with very slight shift in chronology from Half-Rome who stresses events before the murder, to the monologues of the Pope and Guido which occur immediately before the execution. (Book XII acts as an epilogue to the whole tale.) The simultaneity of time in the varying perspectives of the monologues is the infinite moment crossing through time (as chronos) from the vertical (kairos).[5]

McLuhan, whose remarks on tactility and simultaneity of experience seemed appropriate to use in Chapter I, has commented occasionally on The Ring and the Book. He calls it a "familiar instance of the abrupt newspaper juxtaposition of events in 'picturesque perspective' . . . , an explicitly newspaperish crime report given as a series of 'inside stories,' each one contained within another like Chinese boxes."[6] The newspaper was Browning's "art model for his impressionist epic," and like Dickens and Poe he was led by newspaper serial publication "to the process of writing backwards. This means simultaneity of all parts of a composition. Simultaneity compels sharp focus on effect of thing made. . . . Simultaneity is formula for the writing of both detective story and symbolist poem."[7]

Although Browning uses the analogy between artist, who infuses body with life or spirit, and God who makes the Word flesh in Incarnation, his own lack of hubris causes him to add an important qualification. Man was created, and he, not able to "make in turn,"

> Yet forced to try and make, else fail to grow,--
> Formed to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain
> The good beyond him,--which attempt is growth,--
> Repeats God's process in man's due degree,
> Attaining man's proportionate result,--
> Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps. (I,714-719)

This is the artistic and human message frequent in Browning's poetry, the one that Andrea del Sarto could not grasp, and that Caliban distorted so badly. The artist can bring back to life, if not create original life:

Inalienable, the arch-prerogative
Which turns thought, act--conceives, expresses too!
No less, man, bounded, yearning to be free,
May so project his surplusage of soul
In search of body, so add self to self
By owning what lay ownerless before,--
So find, so fill full, so appropriate forms--
That, although nothing which had never life
Shall get life from him, be, not having been
Yet, something dead may get to live again,
Something with too much life or not enough,
Which, either way imperfect, ended once:
An end whereat man's impulse, starts the dead alive,
Completes the incomplete and saves the thing.
(I, 720-734)

The process of resuscitation, breathing back life into a once living thing (as Elisha breathed life into a corpse) sounds psychologically like Childe Roland's quest to find his body, his other self. Indeed, this theme picks up the thread of life-in-death which we noted in many of the lyrics and monologues. For the poet, however, the object resurrected as a work of art then becomes external to the self.

A further example Browning uses to explain the artistic process also contains overtones from "Childe Roland." Why does the mage say, half in truth but "resting on a lie," that he raises a ghost? Man cannot make man, but,

"I can detach from me, commission forth
"Half of my soul; which in its pilgrimage
"O'er old unwandered waste ways of the world,
"May chance upon some fragment of a whole,
"Rag of flesh, scrap of bone in dim disuse,
"Smoking flax that fed fire once: prompt therein
"I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play,
"Push lines out to the limit, lead forth last
"(By a moonrise through a ruin of a crypt)
"Mistakenly felt: then write my name with Faust's!"
(I, 749-759)

What the magician can do, what Sludge only pretends to do, is what Roland had to do for himself in his world-wide wanderings. Browning, now both alchemist and mage in terms of his metaphors, often takes poetic wanderings after cast-off subjects, stories unwanted by others, and therefore destined to remain dead. Life, paradoxically, is given to a tale whose overt subject is the violent death of eight people.

With this Introduction as "framework" to our concerns in The Ring and the Book, we now move into an examination of the recurring animal and plant imagery and motifs which have been seen as important in the shorter poems. The divisions correspond largely to the sections in Chapter II, just as the image patterns and their aesthetic, psychological implications correspond to those of the earlier poems. The rose and the spider will be the central, although not sole, images, in the first section involving the interaction of innocence and evil. The section following will deal with the area which might be termed initiation, with its own imagery depicting both spiritual and physical awakenings. There will follow a major study of the images and psychological themes in The Ring and the Book which bear out content and imagery in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came;" here, Guido will be brought to the forefront. Finally the Pope's monologue will be evaluated in terms of the image patterns and themes of the whole poem.

## B: The Rose and the Spider; Evil in the Garden of Innocence

When we move to the individual animal and plant images within the ring of monologues, we are faced with an enormous choice, not only of single images, but of whole categories of imagery which would illustrate Browning's creation--what Coleridge called "'unity in multiety.'"[8] Rather than cataloguing all the major animal images, for example, which characterize each dramatis persona either directly or indirectly.[9] I will choose two major images, one flora, one fauna, whose aesthetic, symbolic, and psychological implications have already emerged. The rose, with its variants, is a recurring motif in The Ring and the Book just as it is in the rest of the canon. It is used most often to describe Pompilia; its colour and value vary in accordance with the speaker of the image. The rose's concomitant, its setting, is the garden of innocence which is sometimes an Eden: this garden will be examined separately as well. The second image, that of the spider, leads us into the garden of experience. Although it sometimes is used to describe Guido, it makes its most striking appearance in an allusion to Caponsacchi.

The rose has as many guises in The Ring and the Book as there are speakers and situations in combination. Thus, although we have linked it with the garden in its innocent state, the rose, depending on its context, may be seen as a product of evil.

Half-Rome, whose partiality is for Guido, imagines the Count's initial decision to choose Pompilia for a wife while he is visiting Rome for quite other ends:

> . . .What if he gained thus much,
> Wrung out this sweet drop from the bitter Past,
> Bore off this rose-bud from the prickly brake,
> To justify such torn clothes and scratched hands,
> And, after all, brought something back from Rome?
> (II, 325-329)

Pompilia is from the outset, in her untouched state, an object to be owned by Guido (compare the Duke's attitude to his last Duchess), one piece of untrammelled beauty to be won from the prickly thorns of sacred Rome, where Guido has failed to gain entrance.

The Other Half-Rome, on the surface a champion of Pompilia, uses this metaphor to describe the world's failure to notice or appreciate beauty until after it has been associated with violence:

> 'T is just a flower's fate: past parterre we trip,
> Till peradventure someone plucks our sleeve--
> "Yon blossom at the briar's end, that's the rose
> "Two jealous people fought for yesterday
> "And killed each other: see, there's undisturbed
> "A pretty pool at the root, of rival red!"
> Then cry we, "Ah, the perfect paragon!"
> Then crave we, "Just one keepsake-leaf for us!" (III,75-82)

Such vicarious hangers-on imply that the innocent rose caused blood to be shed in violence. Later, the same persona describes the priests and others who come to see Pompilia on her deathbed and who are all half in love with her:

> Well, had they viewed her ere the paleness pushed
> The last o' the red o' the rose away: while yet
> Some hand, adventurous 'twixt the wind and her,
> Might let shy life run back and raise the flower
> Rich with reward up to the guardian's face,—
> Would they have kept that hand employed all day
> At fumbling on with prayer-book pages? No!
> Men are men: why then need I say one word
> More than that our mere man the Canon here
> Saw, pitied, loved Pompilia? (III,873-882)

The love, by implication, was a physical one; the innocence claimed by the priest was a "scarlet fiery innocence / As most folk would try muffle up in shade" (III, 895-896). All this is most natural to the worldly-wise Other Half-Rome, but further than that his vision cannot reach.

Tertium Quid, that society parasite who pretends to elevation in his speech and audience, on one of his rhetorical flights of speech damns Pompilia implicitly with this metaphor:

> And then the sudden existence, dewy-dear,
> O' the rose above the dungheap, the pure child
> As good as new created, since withdrawn
> From the horror of the pre-appointed lot
> With the unknown father and the mother known
> Too well . . . . (IV, 246-251)

His innuendoes, although he condescends to give Pompilia her just deserts, really are less humane than the more rank descriptions given by Half-Rome of Pompilia's blighted origins.[10] Tertium Quid enjoys the wit and beauty of a parallel metaphor in which Pompilia is this time a lily, a symbol of purity:

> The strange tall pale beautiful creature grown
> Lily-like out o' the cleft i' the sun-smit rock
> To bow its white miraculous birth of buds
> I' the way of wandering Joseph and his spouse,--
> So painters fancy: here it was a fact. (IV, 322-326)

The implication is still, by context, that something beautiful can have a worthless core (as, for example, a pearl) but that if good comes out of evil the end indeed justifies the means. Tertium Quid is wholly concerned with making an impression rather than with seeking the truth.

Pompilia herself uses the recurring metaphor of rose and briar, but in a simple, disinterested manner. Who would frown at Violante, one might ask, for taking Pompilia away from her natural environment, one which could only contribute to a life of sorrow and sin?

> Well, God, you see! God plants us where we grow.
> It is not that because a bud is born
> At a wild briar's end, full i' the wild beast's way,
> We ought to pluck and put it out of reach
> On the oak-tree top,--say, "There the bud belongs!"
> (VII, 301-305)

Violante's deceptions have led to a worse sorrow, almost as if it had been determined from the outset. The rose becomes a symbol for something more acted upon than acting, for an impressionable being like Pompilia.

Guido's second monologue contains three allusions to Pompilia as a rose; expectedly, these do not emphasize the higher qualities of either flower or girl. He complains first of her ability to destroy his passion by her very unspoken judgment that he is too old, that he indeed repels her--"A little saucy rose-bud minx can strike / Death-damp into the breast of a doughty king" (XI, 1003-04)--by commenting on his youth as being long past. He is too blind to his own nature to see that Pompilia is motivated by other fears than simply his age. Guido challenges those who advised him to wait for Pompilia's passivity to grow into acceptance through the process of time, who said to him that if he does not win the first flush of love, he may at least earn her friendship, "Not love's first glory but a sober glow" (XI, 1086). Guido replies:

> Go preach that to your nephews, not to me
> Who, tired i' the midway of my life, would stop
> And take my first refreshment, pluck a rose:
> What's this coarse woolly hip, worn smooth of leaf,
> You counsel I go plant in garden-plot,
> Water with tears, manure with sweat and blood,
> In confidence the seed shall germinate
> And, for its very best, some far-off day,
> Grow big, and blow me out a dog-rose bell? (XI, 1090-98)

If Pompilia, not being a royal rose with money and prestige, would prove the quiet hedge rose which served only him, that would be prize enough , so Guido claims. But such a "dream" rose is metamorphosed almost immediately into a blighted and deceitful bud, whose innocence is neither internal nor external:

> . . . But this bud,
> Bit through and burned black by the tempter's tooth,
> This bloom whose best grace was the slug outside
> And the wasp inside its bosom,--call you "rose"?
> Claim no immunity from a weed's fate
> For the horrible present! (XI, 1107-12)

That rose, like "the shut bud that holds a bee" in "Porphyria's Lover," harbours something ugly and stinging at her core, which may well imply Caponsacchi, and certainly Pompilia's presumed infidelity. We see that the rose cannot be isolated, kept pure, for even by words the spider has gained access into the communion cup.

However, the quantity of words which Guido pours forth to blight the rose and Pompilia does not in the end outweigh the quality of intuitive truth in Caponsacchi's rose image. He makes a claim for the truth to be found in lowly, everyday experiences, as he ends his monologue:

> To learn not only by a comet's rush
> But a rose's birth,--not by the grandeur, God--
> But the comfort, Christ. (VI, 2094-96)

This short, but intense, tribute culminates a total vision of Pompilia's worth and innocence. For Caponsacchi the birth of a Pompilia is analogous to the Incarnation; the embodiment of such goodness affirms as much as the "comet's rush."

The rose largely, but not wholly, inhabits the garden of innocence, although it may seem to harbour evil (if the wasp is evil) within its bud. There are other garden metaphors on a larger scale where Eden still exists, and the serpent has not entered. Before marriage Pompilia lived, according to Other Half-Rome, in a state of sexual innocence, inviolate as is the lily. Was it true or false, he asks, that in Via Vittoria was hidden

> Lily of a maiden, white with intact leaf
> Guessed thro' the sheath that saved it from the sun?
> A daughter with the mother's hands still clasped
> Over her head for fillet virginal,
> A wife worth Guido's house and hand and heart? (III, 365-369)

Violante, ironically, manipulates the violation of Pompilia's very being.

In the garden of the Comparini Pompilia flourished, encircled by the couple:

> I' the midst of Pietro here, Violante there,
> Each, like a semicircle with stretched arms,
> Joining the other round her preciousness—
> Two walls that go about a garden-plot
> Where a chance sliver, branchlet slipt from bole
> Of some tongue-leaved eye-figured Eden tree,
> Filched by two exiles and borne far away,
> Patiently glorifies their solitude . . . . (III, 230-237)

The image metamorphoses the tree into a snake, which symbolizes Pompilia's natural mother to Other Half-Rome.[11] Growing now, Pompilia just reaches the public gaze, as a tree over the garden wall:

> Nay, above towered a light tuft of bloom
> To be toyed with by butterfly or bee,
> Done good to or else harm to from outside:
> Pompilia's root, stalk and a branch or two
> Home enclosed still, the rest would be the world's.
> (III, 244-248)

The lines imply that she is barely ready for the exploratory awakening by butterfly or bee, insects used so effectively in images to portray initiatory physical love in "In a Gondola."

Another period of "white innocence" occurs during Pompilia's flight with Caponsacchi to Rome (although other eyes, as we have seen, view the flight as to some degree an abduction). At one stop there is a garden where Caponsacchi "plucked a handful of Spring herb and bloom" (VI, 1978); it was probably here, too, that Pompilia foretold her own maternity by holding a "new-born babe" in a Madonna-like pose. The brief rest in the garden is worth for her a night's sleep. She asks Caponsacchi,

> "How do you call that tree with the thick top
> "That holds in all its leafy green and gold
> "The sun now like an immense egg of fire?"
> (It was a million-leaved mimosa.) (VI, 1336-40)

These lines "image" Pompilia's life at this particular instant--the sun which the tree holds like an egg of fire evokes the golden tree of the Hesperides. The egg itself has been used as a symbol of Pompilia's unity, newness, and potential.[12] Also, the sun and fire are emblematic of Apollo and the form of art and life. The forces of Dionysus are rooted in the tree, unseen, and will have to burst forth before Pompilia's life is rounded out.

Another garden symbolizes for Caponsacchi the recognition, amidst his turmoil over the temptation to rescue Pompilia, that he has all this time been a very profane, secular priest, prone to smile pityingly on those priests who completely abnegated the flesh. Yet when the test first comes he sees himself wed to the stone heart of the Church, and not free to bestow his "life-blood" on a "fleshly woman."

> Now the church changed tone--
> Now, when I found out first that life and death
> Are means to an end, that passion uses both,
> Indisputably mistress of the man
> Whose form of worship is self-sacrifice:
> Now, from the stone lungs sighed the scrannel voice
> "Leave that live passion, come be dead with me!"
> As if, i' the fabled garden, I had gone
> On great adventure, plucked in ignorance
> Hedge-fruit, and feasted to satiety,
> Laughing at such high fame for hips and haws,
> And scorned the achievement: then come all at once
> O' the prize o' the place, the thing of perfect gold,
> The apple's self: and, scarce my eye on that,
> Was 'ware as well o' the seven-fold dragon's watch.
> (VI, 995-1009)

The garden of the Hesperides has golden fruit to offer but it is guarded by a dragon, a dragon which moves out of the fable and into the events of Caponsacchi's life. Here, the implication is that the Church is the dragon which guards him from seeking such prizes. In a sense it is his awareness of Pompilia's worth and blinding whiteness which makes him see that the prize to be gained is found in duty to God. However, his intuition eventually sweeps across all such rational, religious debate--and he moves to rescue the maiden, in what is an act encompassing and going beyond simple duty. The priest girds his sword, becomes the militant St. George. Browning implies that reason leads only so far; that ultimately the heart must overrule the head, especially at the moment of epiphany. (Yet the Pope is able to combine reason and intuition in a far-seeing evaluation of all the acts of the _dramatis personae_.)

Pompilia is seen earlier by Pietro in the image of the golden apple, when she takes the attention of such personages as the Abate and Guido. He is stunned to find (continuing the allusion to Pompilia as tree)

> How somebody had somehow somewhere seen
> Their tree-top-tuft of bloom above the wall,
> And come now to apprize them the tree's self
> Was no such crab-sort as should go feed swine,
> But veritable gold, the Hesperian ball
> Ordained for Hercules to haste and pluck,
> And bear and give the Gods to banquet with--
> Hercules standing ready at the door. (III, 380-387)

Although the myth itself is appropriate to Pompilia, Pietro's emphasis on wealth and title as qualities which transform the crab-apple to a golden-apple shows a marked lack of values. His emphasis contrasts sharply with Caponsacchi's recognition of Pompilia as the prize to make sacrifices for. The priest is infinitely more worthy to be Hercules than is Guido. However, the garden keepers, especially the Eve foster-mother, welcome the snake into their midst to pluck the apple which is the "Hesperian ball."[13]

Thus we see already that the organizing motifs of rose and spider, and their equivalents, have proven by no means exclusive of one another, nor is one the complete epitome of innocence, the other of evil. Browning's subtle and flexible mind could not be expected to give any image a single meaning in a one-to-one correspondence. His images are continually shifting, transposing themselves, metamorphosing within the drama's framework into something else, according to time, place, situation, speaker, recipient or subject.[14] The insubstantiality of words is demonstrated over and over in the word, yet a sense of the infinite emerges through the flux.

The shift to the spider image is not a complete break, then. However, in itself, the spider has a new set of connotations and symbolic values, as has been seen in the earlier poems where it functioned. One of the most striking images in which it occurs is in "Gold Hair: A Story of Pornic," where the spider represents a hidden vice in an otherwise pure "vessel." "Had a spider found out the communion-cup, / Was a toad in the christening-font?" Here, then, is Pompilia's metaphor for the world's tendency to see evil in the midst of genuine purity, to cast a black blot upon the whiteness of Caponsacchi's virtue:

> The glory of his nature, I had thought,
> Shot itself out in white light, blazed the truth
> Through every atom of his act with me:
> Yet where I point you, through the crystal shrine,
> Purity in quintessence, one dew-drop,
> You all descry a spider in the midst.
> One says "The head of it is plain to see,"
> And one, "They are feet by which I judge,"
> All say, "These films were spun by nothing else."
> (VII, 921-929)

This passage, with its central image remarkedly similar to the one in "Gold Hair," has importance beyond its immediate context. It is related to the relativity of truth for ordinary mortals, to their tendency to see what they want to see, to delude themselves and others. The dangers are more positive ones when what they see is evil or guilt where none exist. For Pompilia, the spider means something abhorrent, some desecration of truth and beauty. The "crystal shrine" is indeed sacred to her like a "communion cup." But for Browning the spider could play many roles. Most important in terms of its function, it is an image from nature, and from that side of nature which we try to keep hidden. People catch a glimpse of head, feet, web—and surmise there is a body. For them it is a miniature of man's darker nature. For Pompilia it does not exist, not in conjunction with her soldier-saint. Other onlookers drop many innuendoes about Caponsacchi's unconscious motivation in the abduction-rescue of Pompilia. After all, was he not a very social, secular priest at best? If we cannot forget the spider image of Caponsacchi once it is voiced, it may not mean anything more "evil" than man's closeness to nature, and the necessity of the animal to live within the spiritual. In any case, there is no ambiguity in Caponsacchi's belief in the purity and innocence of Pompilia, nor in his outward actions.

The spider also weaves a web which may partially obscure the truth, the "gold," as it does in "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha." In "Two In the Campagna" the spider's web symbolizes the difficulty of translating thought to image, and image back into thought. The layers of webs which make up the fabric of The Ring and the Book are infinitely more complex. The truth resides in the individual threads; if they are entirely torn away man, in his finiteness, may not be able to see or bear the "crystal shrine" in its brilliance. Or to put it another way, if the web were completely unravelled it might prove empty of a central truth, since its truth is in its weaving and design.

The "toad in the christening-font" also has its counterparts in The Ring and the Book, but these shall be met with in the section linking the poem with "Childe Roland," for they are often the poisoned toads like those projected by Roland on his landscape.

As mentioned, the spider does often (more appropriately, most would add) make its appearance in relation to Guido. In one of his letters replying to the (forged)[15] letters from Pompilia, Caponsacchi wishes that Guido might wait in vain for his arrival (as reported by the female "lacky-of-lies" or go-between for Guido) and that the disappointment of not catching priest and wife together may

> "--So tantalise and so enrage by turns,
> "Until the two fall each on the other like
> "Two famished spiders, as the coveted fly
> "That toys long, leaves their net and them at last!"
> (VI, 614-617)

This image is a direct personification of those who torment their captive. Half-Rome quotes Law as making its compromise judgment in the case of Guido versus Caponsacchi and Pompilia. Law pictures Caponsacchi as first thinking Pompilia to be a weak woman, as the alleged writer of the letters:

> "But, now he sees her face and hears her speech,
> "Much he repents him if, in fancy-freak
> "For a moment the minutest measurable,
> "He coupled her with the first flimsy word
> "O' the self-spun fabric some mean spider-soul
> "Furnished forth: stop his films and stamp on him!"
> (II, 1161-66)

Ample evidence exists in The Ring and the Book to show that words as employed by certain people can weave webs of deceit and lies. Caponsacchi affirms what Law imagines, as he describes his reaction when the court sneers, "What if she wrote the letters?"

> Learned Sir,
> I told you there's a picture in our church.
> Well, if a low-browed verger sidled up
> Bringing me, like a blotch, on his prod's point,
> A transfixed scorpion, let the reptile writhe,
> And then said, "See a thing that Rafael made--
> "This venom issued from Madonna's mouth!"
> I should reply, "Rather, the soul of you
> "Has issued from your body, like from like,
> "By way of the ordure-corner!" (VI, 666-676)

The metaphor conjures up a Medieval painting where evil words and deeds are symbolized by physical representations of evil. A plan for adultery could no more issue from Pompilia's lips than a poisonous scorpion could come from the Madonna. The scorpion is as abhorrent to Caponsacchi, in connection with Pompilia, as the spider is to her in the passage quoted above.[16] They parallel each other in their defence of and belief in one another.

The spider and the scorpion have insinuated their way into the garden of Eden, and a change has occurred. Pompilia is aware of the new garden she has entered after her marriage to Guido. When she first sees Caponsacchi her thoughts are:

> "I have a keeper in the garden here
> "Whose sole employment is to strike me low
> "If ever I, for solace, seek the sun.
> "Life means with me successful feigning death,
> "Lying stone-like, eluding notice so,
> "Forgoing here the turf and there the sky.
> "Suppose that man had been instead of this!" (VII, 1001-07)

One is reminded slightly of Caliban lying low, out of the notice of Setebos, and with no concept of a God of love. The keeper of the garden is in this context the spider who traps the fly in his web— Guido. The "lone garden-quarter" becomes black and haunted in Browning's description of the "wolves" who track Pompilia to the

Comparini's villa one lone winter-eve;

> . . . it was eve,  
> The second of the year, and oh so cold!  
> Ever and anon there flittered through the air  
> A snow-flake, and a scanty touch of snow  
> Crusted the grass-walk and the garden-mould. (I, 605-609)

It is the nadir of the year, and of the events in Pompilia's life. The garden of experience in a broader sense is present throughout the poem, in images of death, destruction, and waste; these will be examined in connection with the "Childe Roland" themes and imagery of The Ring and the Book.

## C: Imagery of Awakening and Transformation

Between the garden of innocence and the garden of experience is the place of transformation. To depict this psychological state numerous images, metaphors, and symbols of sexual and spiritual awakening (either violent or gentle) may be found. Both Pompilia and Caponsacchi undergo some measure of transformation and loss of innocence; even Guido is the recipient of new experience. Passion and innocence, body and spirit, are played off against one another in the image patterns. One Browning scholar has stated that,

> Though Browning's imagery in The Ring and the Book as a whole may be characterized as highly sensuous, the poet very seldom uses imagery to comment on the sensuous aspects of the people and objects he is figuratively representing. More often, imagery is used to express the speaker's interpretation of events and his sympathies and prejudices concerning people.[17]

This is a useful distinction to make when we examine some of the sexual imagery in the poem. However, there *are* instances of direct sexual images as an equation for a certain sensual characteristic. More often, it is true, the sexual imagery is a metaphor for a thought, an opinion of another character, and frequently reveals more of the speaker's unconscious than that of his subject. Although any given image must be taken in its context, there are certain patterns of imagery which may be taken almost at face value. That is, having encountered them in earlier poems of Browning, where they have attached to themselves quite a constant meaning, we may take them as having that same meaning when encountered again. Therefore, we move from the image to the revelation of character, rather than from knowledge of character to analysis of image.

?

In the aforementioned category, imagery of transformation, there are a number of allusions to Pompilia's sexual awakening which parallel similar images in "The Flight of the Duchess," among other early poems. Pompilia as "Lily of a maiden, white with intact leaf" (III,365) recalls the "cup-lily" which "crouches with all the white daughters" in "Flight." The hunt of the deer as depicted in that poem signifies a sadistic initiation which was to be forced on the Duchess by the Duke. Pompilia herself is the victim of the hunt, for when Caponsacchi urges her to take an hour's rest on her flight to Rome, we read that "her whole face changed," as she anticipated Guido's pursuit:

> The eyes burned up from faintness, like the fawn's
> Tired to death in the thicket, when she feels
> The probing spear o' the huntsman . . . . (VI, 1286-88)

An image of unforced sexual awakening in "Flight" is the breaking of ice by the stag in early autumn, a process hastened finally by the sun, till the waters loosen and roll free. In The Ring and the Book the Archbishop, upon whom Pompilia calls for help, plays on this same theme to urge the fulfillment of her fleshly union with Guido. (His words throughout are being quoted by Pompilia):

> "Here is Spring,
> "The sun shines as he shone at Adam's fall,
> "The earth requires that warmth reach everywhere:
> "What, must your patch of snow be saved forsooth
> "Because you rather fancy snow than flowers?" (VII, 790-794)

Pompilia does not plead for virginity for its own sake, as she is accused, but as a measure of the distance she and Guido are separated in all other ways. Guido, on the other hand, stipulates,

> Dreadfully honest also--"Since our souls
> "Stand each from each, a whole world's width between,
> "Give me the fleshly vesture I can reach
> "And rend and leave just fit for hell to burn!"
> (VII, 781-784)

Thus are hell and sex equated, as when the Archbishop tells Pompilia, "Since your husband bids, / Swallow the burning coal he proffers you!" (VII, 729-30).

The Archbishop uses both a Biblical story and a parable to further his argument for Pompilia's duty to her husband. Throughout the poem the Virgin-Madonna figure has alternated with the Eve-Serpent-Lucretia figure, to depict Pompilia. Here the Archbishop combines the two figures, after Pompilia has pleaded to be allowed to enter a convent:

> "Virginity,--'t is virtue or 't is vice.
> "That which was glory in the Mother of God
> "Had been, for instance, damnable in Eve
> "Created to be mother of mankind." (VII, 757-760)

Eve would have been "pushed straight out of Paradise" had she chosen to remain "Single." "'If motherhood be qualified impure, / I catch you making God command Eve sin!'" (VII, 767-768). This argument is specious, for one can easily imagine the Archbishop, should it suit his purpose, calling sex the very forbidden fruit with which the serpent tempted Eve. And, ironically, when Pompilia does attain motherhood she is associated strongly, at that Christmas season, with the Virgin Mary, not with Eve. If it were left to Fra Lippo Lippi, she would be invested with both qualities. The value and significance of flesh is ever to be kept in mind when considering Browning's poetry.

The Archbishop uses the parable as a "honeyed cake" (after the harsher chastisements have drawn Pompilia to deny that she is ignorant of the male-female relationship, citing the advances made upon her by Guido's clerical brother):

> "'Without a parable spake He not to them.'
> "There was a ripe round long black toothsome fruit,
> "Even a flower-fig, the prime boast of May:
> "And, to the tree, said . . . either the spirit o' the fig,
> "Or, if we bring in men, the gardener,
> "Archbishop of the orchard . . . .
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> "Well, anyhow, one with authority said
> "'Ripe fig, burst skin, regale the fig-pecker--
> "'The bird whereof thou art a perquisite!'
> "'Nay,' with a flounce, replied the restif fig,
> "'I much prefer to keep my pulp myself:
> "'He may go breakfastless and dinnerless,
> "'Supperless of one crimson seed, for me!'
> "So, back she flopped into her bunch of leaves.
> "He flew off, left her,--did the natural lord,--
> "And lo, three hundred thousand bees and wasps
> "Found her out, feasted on her to the shuck:
> "Such gain the fig's that gave its bird no bite!"
> (VII, 821-841)

The Archbishop is sardonically frank in his portrayal of the female body, very thinly veiled in plant allusions.[18] Now in "By the Fire-side" and "The Englishman in Italy" such sexual images of ripened fruit attained a complete naturalness as symbols for sexual potential and fulfillment. Here the extended metaphor is self-conscious and couched in a moral--embrace your husband; that will keep off other men--reflecting a great deal upon the Archbishop's vicarious pleasure in his role as marriage counsellor. He has created a parable in his own image.

Bottini's "defence" of Pompilia contains many innuendoes to the effect that (as seemed the Duke's last Duchess) she was indiscriminate in receiving and bestowing her favours and charms, loving all alike. In a metaphor reminiscent of the central one in "A Light Woman," and also of the bee-moth-flower metaphor of "In a Gondola," Bottini admonishes:

> Which butterfly of the wide air shall brag
> "I was preferred to Guido"--when 't is clear
> The cup, he quaffs at, lay with olent breast
> Open to gnat, midge, bee and moth as well? (IX, 311-314)

Pompilia is seen by him as one "chalice" ready to entertain all company. For Browning Pompilia is a holy chalice, however. Pompilia herself varies such imagery to ascribe to Caponsacchi her spiritual awakening:

> But if meanwhile some insect with a heart
> Worth floods of lazy music, spendthrift joy--
> Some fire-fly renounced Spring for my dwarfed cup,
> Crept close to me, brought lustre for the dark,
> Comfort against the cold,--what though excess
> Of comfort should miscall the creature--sun?
> What did the sun to hinder while harsh hands
> Petal by petal, crude and colourless,
> Tore me? This one heart brought me all the Spring!
> (VII, 1519-27)

Here perhaps is the best comparison of the awakenings she received at the hands of Guido and Caponsacchi, respectively, one harsh and violent, the other the touch of Spring from Apollo. Yet there is an underlying current of sexual interest, however camouflaged or latent, between Pompilia and Caponsacchi, which is evident in their own descriptions of one another. For Browning the body is not separate from the soul, nor does one deny the other. Hoxie Neale Fairchild explains the body-spirit affinity which love brings about for Browning's _personae_:

> The great thing, of course, was love . . . ; for Browning the best love is sexual love regarded as a sort of Caponsacchi-Pompilia or Perseus-Andromeda or Robert-Elizabeth incarnation. It is very important for Browning that the Word should be made flesh--so important that in the erotic union of human and divine the fleshification of spirit is sometimes more obvious than the spiritualization of flesh.[19]

Fairchild's conclusions have been amply demonstrated in poems prior to The Ring and the Book; with Pompilia, however, the state reached in her monologue and that of the Pope is one where flesh is indeed spiritualized.

Guido is most aroused to bitterness and hate when he describes his sexual frustrations and his wounded masculine pride. His self-image is influenced by what he supposes to be Pompilia's repugnance for his person. If she sees fleshly union with him in terms of hell, he too sees himself in hellish images. He intensifies the metaphors to portray Pompilia as a neurotic, frightened child, but he feels himself to have become what his words describe. The animals that pour forth in his rhetoric are indeed externalizations of his own inner fears. It is also felt that the Guido portrayed in this section is not so much seventeenth-century, as a Victorian husband-father figure, with many of the Victorian attitudes toward sex. Thus Guido protests that women reject the animal in man, calling him a brute or beast, even while they want the man himself (V, 588-590). Yet he says soon afterwards, "Pompilia's duty was--submit herself, / Afford me pleasure, perhaps cure my bile" (V, 718-719).

There is a long passage in the Count's monologue which strongly conveys, beneath all its rhetoric, Victorian suppression and substitution, and the real sexual frustration which is at the root of Guido's hatred. In turn he reveals his own distaste for the animal in man, and his language symbolizes his tendency to possess and use people as objects, to have pride in them only as ornament or property. His knowledge of the woman's psyche is sadly lacking, but neither does he know himself. Pompilia, he accuses, withheld her body. Although he wants to idealize women as "white" and "chaste and pure," he believes,

> . . . a woman still may take a man
> For the short period his soul wears flesh,
> And, for the soul's sake, understand the fault
> Of armour frayed by fighting . . . . (V, 599-602)

The soul and the body are quite separate to Guido, and thus, he believes, to Pompilia. Yet in her words it is his soul she rejects. Guido continues by calling not upon Pompilia's sense of wifely duty, but simply upon the law:

> With a wife, I look to find all wifeliness,
> As when I buy, timber and twig, a tree--
> I buy the song o' the nightingale inside. (V, 604-606)

But the pact is not kept mutually or willingly. And soon charges against his villainous person are being shouted in the streets, first by the Comparini, then by

> . . . the poor young wife left lonely here!
> Repugnant in my person as my mind,
> I sought,--was ever heard of such revenge?
> --To lure and bind her to so cursed a couch,
> Such co-embrace with sulphur, snake and toad,
> That she was fain to rush forth, call the stones
> O' the common street to save her, not from hate
> Of mine merely, but . . . must I burn my lips
> With the blister of the lie? . . . the satyr-love
> Of who but my own brother, the young priest . . . .
> (V, 632-641)

Sex is hell, death, and devilish creatures--all lies about him, in Guido's words, but they are his words. (However, even stronger language of the same imagistic vein will be brought to bear by Caponsacchi upon Guido, as will be noted below.)

Pompilia's marriage initiation is couched in imagery of purgatory, then, and the "suphur, snake and toad" encroach on the sanctity of the pure chalice. Guido also uses an extended metaphor of Pompilia as a "pure smooth egg" which issues forth a "cockatrice" which must be stamped on (V, 654-664). The egg is another symbol of beginning, of formlessness becoming form, and is used elsewhere, as noted above, with different connotations.

Finally, in Guido's discussion of the marriage intimacies, there is a contrast between the marriage of love (with himself as courtly lover)--in such case he would have found in the corners of his heart "remnants of dim love the long disused, / And dusty crumblings of romance!" (V, 695-696)--and the marriage of arrangement into which he has entered. This surely does not bind him to give an iota of love,

> . . . to bestow one drop
> Of blood shall dye my wife's true-love-knot pink?
> Pompilia was no pigeon, Venus' pet,
> That shuffled from between her pressing paps
> To sit on my rough shoulder,--but a hawk
> I bought at a hawk's price and carried home
> To do hawk's service . . . . (V, 699-705)

Should she not prove her worth, then "twist her neck!" Guido's metamorphosis of Pompilia from pigeon to hawk must of course be viewed with his own character in mind. But it does link the poem, in imagery, to "The Flight of the Duchess," "My Last Duchess," and that poem where the lady's innocence is not assured, "Count Guismond." We may determine then who is victim in the relationship.

What is said about the relationship between Pompilia and Caponsacchi, and especially of the "awakening" of the latter? The imagery applied to them by Guido, quite expectedly, is overtly sexual. Discovering them in the inn near Rome, he finds in the chamber what confirms his fears:

> However needless confirmation now--
> The witches' circle intact, charms undisturbed
> That raised the spirit and succubus,--letters, to-wit,
> Love-laden, each the bag o' the bee that bore
> Honey from lily and rose to Cupid's hive,--
> Now, poetry in some rank blossom-burst,
> Now, prose . . . . (V, 1135-41)

The man of "fact" and logic distrusts the poet. Caponsacchi is also described in symbols of potency by Half-Rome, representative of Guido's supporters:

> --Lord and a Canon also,--what would you have?
> Such are the red-clothed milk-swollen poppy-heads
> That stand and stiffen 'mid the wheat o' the Church!
> (II, 938-940)

(See the lines from "Up In a Villa--Down In the City," quoted earlier, which image the poppy.) Bottini similarly makes Caponsacchi out to be the natural man. Suppose he was lonely for a woman, and sought Pompilia out at her parents' villa?

> Shall it amaze the philosophic mind
> If he, long wont the enpurpled cup to quaff,
> Have feminine society at will,
> Being debarred abruptly from all drink
> Save at the spring which Adam used for wine,
> Drunk harm to just the health he hoped to guard
> And, trying abstinence, gains malady? (IX, 1261-67)

Bottini calls such visitations "nocturnal taste of intercourse"--but hastens to add that of course they never happened! His rhetoric, his careful choice of words, insidiously suggests guilt while he cries "Innocent!"

The Other-Half Rome, in his defence of Pompilia, also casts a great doubt as he reports on Caponsacchi's "scarlet fiery innocence / As most folk would try muffle up in shade" (III, 895-896). It is strange, then, that the priest should maintain "for truth's sake" that it was

Pompilia who made the first overtures, "penned him letters"

> . . . so stimulating love
> That he, no novice to the taste of thyme,
> Turned from such over-luscious honey-clot
> At end o' the flower, and would not lend his lip
> Till . . . but the tale here frankly outsoars faith:
> There must be falsehood somewhere. (III, 902-907)

Although Other Half-Rome voices the lack of credibility seen by Half-Rome in Pompilia's denial of the letters, it is in order to introduce the possibility (which he believes) that the whole scheme, including letters, was planned and executed by Guido.

There is certainly some ambiguity in Caponsacchi's position at the time of the flight, an ambiguity denied by both the priest and Browning at least on a conscious level, but which enters unconsciously at many points. Indeed, in the following passage, in which Caponsacchi describes his own awakening in the Spring, when he chooses to act, we remember the passionate, sensual implications of the naked Andromeda chained to the rock. Caponsacchi is as often the pagan Perseus, at least by implication, as he is the Christian St. George.

> By the invasion I lay passive to,
> In rushed new things, the old were rapt away;
> Alike abolished--the imprisonment
> Of the outside air, the inside weight o' the world
> That pulled me down. Death meant, to spurn the ground,
> Soar to the sky,--die well and you do that.
> The very immolation made the bliss;
> Death was the heart of life, and all the harm
> My folly had crouched to avoid, now proved a veil
> Hiding all gain my wisdom strove to grasp:
> As if the intense centre of the flame
> Should turn a heaven to that devoted fly
> Which hitherto, sophist alike and sage,
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> Would fain, pretending just the insect's good,
> Whisk off, drive back, consign to shade again.
> Into another state, under new rule
> I knew myself was passing swift and sure;
> Whereof the initiatory pang approached,

> Felicitous annoy, as bitter-sweet
> As when the virgin-band, the victors chaste,
> Feel at the end the earthly garments drop,
> And rise with something of a rosy shame
> Into immortal nakedness: so I
> Lay, and let come the proper throe would thrill
> Into the ecstasy and outthrob pain. (VI, 947-973)

Caponsacchi's awakening from his death-in-life state is couched in spiritual and bodily imagery--"immortal nakedness" is itself a symbol of new life. Nevertheless, this passage stresses the fact that the concrete, physical side of the myth is as important to Caponsacchi as is its spiritual meaning. And of course the ambiguities of the myth referred to in connection with "Childe Roland" (see above) are also relevant to Pompilia: she is sometimes the Christian martyr-maid, sometimes Andromeda, sometimes even Helen, and according to the Fisc, she is Hesione (IX, 968-972) who is closer to Astarte in symbolism.

Perhaps we may best leave Caponsacchi's defence in his own hands, when he says,

> She and I are mere strangers now: but priests
> Should study passion; how else cure mankind,
> Who come for help in passionate extremes? (VI, 2078-80)

Such a question would be answered in the affirmative by Browning and some of his personae whom we have met thus far, enhancing, not denying, any moral position to be taken.

Although an attempt has been made to separate images of innocence and good from images of experience and evil (the qualities in each pair are not synonomous, of course) such exclusiveness has not been possible. The section dealing with imagery of awakening and transformation has also necessarily crossed into the realm of evil-innocence duality at times. Although we can depend on Caponsacchi to envision Pompilia as truth, while she sees him as light, for example, the other images and metaphors which characterize them as lower beings cannot be ignored, or simply dismissed because we do not trust the speaker. They are all part of a pattern. Therefore the underworld imagery suggesting guilt and evil which is afixed at one time or another to all the characters is going to have to be faced. Ultimately it climaxes in Guido's second monologue, Book XI, and therefore in the section to follow which examines The Ring and the Book in the light (and the shadow) of the reading made of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," it is upon Guido's soul that we shall focus, while not neglecting the "passionate extremes" of the other central characters, Pompilia and Caponsacchi.

## D: Guido and the Dark Night of His Soul

If Guido is separated from the rest of the company, there is no question that the animal images connoting every form of sin and black evil outnumber those found in connection with any other major character. The cumulative effect of listing the animals used throughout the whole poem to characterize Guido is startling and dramatic in itself. These creatures who are from time to time a part of Guido include: elephant, horse, ox, wolf, werewolf, animal in den, caged animal, dog, swine, sheep, lamb, fox, tiger cat, wild cat, cat, mouse, lynx, lion, badger, ferret, bear, bull, owl, bird, dabchick, hawk, bird of prey, swan, decoy bird, rooster, bat, fly, bee, snake, dragon, serpent, leviathan, fish, sea monster, worm, maggot, stockfish, soldier crab, and the witches' brew of "sulphur, snake and toad." The leitmotifs for Guido are the wolf and the sea monster, and all variations thereof. Pompilia and Caponsacchi, two personae whose words we have come to believe, both ascribe to Guido the characteristics of hawk, beast, snake or serpent, and dog or mad dog. As well, much imagery of the fallen world and of cruelty in animals occurs in Guido's own monologues, particularly in the second, when he sheds his veneer or skin, as it were. Upon examination, many of the patterns and figures of the landscape and the objects on it which are discovered in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" emerge in Guido's characterization and monologues. From these image patterns stem similar psychological and philosophical levels of reading Guido's role in The Ring and the Book.

The "Childe Roland" imagery and themes are not only appropriate to Guido's character and situation. They attach themselves to a greater or lesser degree to all the characters. Thus, with Pompilia there are more allusions to dream than in the other monologues, and to nightmare which is the underside of her garden of innocence.[20] Caponsacchi's virulent condemnation of Guido in Swiftian invective, however morally justified (as from the angel Saint Michael) does suggest the possibility of repression-projection of his own well-controlled emotions. In effect, the conclusions which are reached in "Childe Roland" may be seen in the much longer drama. The dream in the earlier poem becomes real, on a narrative level, in The Ring and the Book, but underneath is still another level of reality, the journey of the soul towards self-knowledge, the emergence of the "buried life" of man.

Browning deliberately chose to emphasize and make more vividly black the evil of man which the Old Yellow Book revealed to him. His wife felt this evil, and Julia Wedgwood in particular reference to this poem criticized his "scientific interest in evil," in "the psychology of wrong."[21] Miss Wedgwood continues:

> I know that we can only discern the white against the black. But hatred and scorn of evil, though it be inseparable from the love of good, ought not surely to predominate over it? I know it does with natural man. One takes the good for granted, one exclaims when it comes to an end, everywhere it is the evil that seems positive. But I look upon the Poet as essentially the supernatural man and I complain of him when he only mirrors our weakness.[22]

> You seem to me so to hunger for intensity that you lose the sense of proportion whenever you begin to lay on dark shades.[23]

> We need the atmosphere of meanness and cruelty to exhibit fully the luminous soul that centres the picture. But surely, surely we have more of this than the small white figure can bear?[24]

These very crucial charges, anticipating those made by Santayana, Browning answers in two ways. He emphasizes once more that he is working with "facts"--they have determined both his subject and its treatment (which he considers inseparable).[25] He cannot alter them "to better result."[26] "Before I die, I hope to purely invent something,--here my pride was concerned to invent nothing: the minutest circumstance that denotes character is true: the black is so much--the white, no more."[27]. We question Browning's strong reluctance here to acknowledge that he created anything not already there, in fact, and in fancy, being "one fact the more." Nevertheless, in his terms he has re-created everything; certainly the basic story is sordid enough, perhaps more generally greyish than sharply black and white. However, it will be seen that black and white are only two facets of a multi-coloured spectrum; the numerous image patterns reveal evil, and goodness arising in spite of evil, in every area of life.

Browning's second response embraces more of his own philosophy:

> But remember, first that this is God's world, as he made it for reasons of his own, and that to change its conditions is not to account for them--as you will presently find me try to do. I was struck with the enormous wickedness and weakness of the main composition of the piece, and with the incidental evolution of good thereby . . . . The curious depth below depth of depravity here--in this chance lump taken as a sample of the soil--might well have warned another from spreading it out, but I thought that, since I could do it, and even like to do it, my affair it was rather than another's.[28]

In Browning's scheme of things, evil does have its place. E.D.H. Johnson speaks of Browning's (like William James's) pluralistic view of the universe where evil is a given fact in the natural order of things, and where truth comes from the individual rebelliously asserting his will against this evil.[29] Browning answers Miss Wedgwood's charge that Guido is too evil for the world as God made it, and would not be found in it, by saying that the depth of wickedness gives rise to proportionate heights of good; "this good (of my lot) comes through --is evolved by--that prodigy of bad. . ; ."[30] This "*is* the world as it is, and will be--*here* at least."[31]

Browning's metaphor of evil (Guido), as a lump of earth he enjoys spreading out for study, is perhaps a lead into Miss Wedgwood's description of the Pompilia monologue: "Yes, it is a lovely Snowdrop growing out of that dunghill, but I can't forgive you for planting it there."[32] She touches on the crux of her charges (again using the earthy metaphor) when she protests Browning's involvement, his very entering into the minds and bodies of Guido and his compatriots:

> It is you lending so much of yourself *to* your contemptible characters makes me so hate them . . . . Certainly you present us with a wonderful variety of mud; the defence is even more hateful than the attack. The impure medium is wonderfully brought out in the contrast between the sullied image seen through it and the picture in all its native purity.[32]

The characters with whom she sees Browning identifying, feeling empathy, if not sympathy with; and the "impure medium" (couched in terms which strongly suggest excrement) with its "sullied image" of the pure picture (Pompilia), are content and form of that side of man which cannot be ignored. If not faced consciously, it emerges in strange shapes through the unconscious. Miss Wedgwood is only being thoroughly of her time to wish life to be depicted as a cameo of opalescent pure souls such as Pompilia. Browning's thesis in these letters is not a justification of evil, but a strong acknowledgment of its psychological "thereness." It will be left to André Gide, a modern exponent of "evil," to provide a further defence against such charges, at the conclusion of this section.

There is an unconscious level of existence to the characters in their ring of monologues, and it emerges through clear-cut images, themselves an attempt to cut through the cant of thoughts and words. The dream pattern which orders the images in "Childe Roland" is at least recognized by Pompilia, in her death-in-life existence. Caponsacchi's monologue gives support to her. Pompilia's dream is a nightmare which began, she recalls, when she found herself in the church being made the lawful wife of Count Guido Franceschini:

> All since is one blank,
> Over and ended; a terrific dream.
> It is the good of dreams--so soon they go!
> Wake in a horror of heart-beats, you may--
> Cry, "The dread thing will never from my thoughts!"
> Still, a few daylight doses of plain life,
> Cock-crow and sparrow-chirp, or bleat and bell
> Of goats that trot by, tinkling, to be milked;
> And when you rub your eyes awake and wide,
> Where is the harm o' the horror? Gone! So here.
> I know I wake,--but from what? Blank, I say!
> This is the note of evil: for good lasts. (VII, 584-595)

Pompilia's words poetically phrase much of what is turned into a scientific description of dream-process by Freud. As well, there are a myriad allusions in literature to life as a dream. The gipsy told the Duchess that we die out a dream, and it is just that which Pompilia is experiencing. Like the protagonist at the end of "Childe Roland" she is waking from death-in-life to life-in-death. She was actually stabbed to the heft, one of the deaths foreseen by Roland, by human enemies who _were_ external to her, not projections of the self as Roland sees the giant hills. Her plight is further put in context by Lippi's admonition that life is too big to pass for a dream, that it is _no_ blot nor blank, but means intensely and means good. Pompilia's short years of experience have not given her life such conscious meaning. It is only now, in death, that she realizes what is life. As in awakening from a dream, "What was fast getting indistinct before, / Vanished outright" (VII, 599-600). The images, animal-like, which haunted her, were very much in the foreground for the dreamer, too much so to be seen in any way but _sur_realistically. Now they recede. Pompilia sees the four blank years as "death or dream," thus affirming her awareness of death before this freeing death she now experiences. Indeed, there are countless allusions in the monologues of Pompilia and Caponsacchi to the dream qualities of life, to fantasy, to metamorphosis, even to the "dream-work" which has created delusion and unreality.[34] The cure Pompilia repeatedly pleads for is to end the dream by waking her, for surely such is the nature of dreams. But unfortunately too many of her dreams are in reality waking nightmares.

For there is a dream or nightmare being enacted in the present. Because of the resemblance between the two poems an examination of images from the "Childe Roland" dream, and then a summation of their psychological, spiritual implications will be illuminating to _The Ring_ and the Book. The action of the first poem is a quest, its setting is a wasteland, or a land of blighted plants and frustrated animals. There are instruments of torture, rivers to be forded, deaths (one's own and those of others) to be feared, traps to be avoided, perhaps a dragon to be slain. Ultimately one reaches the Dark Tower, to rescue oneself from death-in-life--but not from death itself which seems inevitable. In The Ring and the Book all the external manifestations of Roland's quest are quite concretely present.[35] They are there in many-faceted forms; one wild cat image is multiplied to six or seven, there are traps of one form or another for every *personae*, the instruments of torture are real as well as imaginary. The dragon and its combatant are recurring mythic figures present in the common unconscious of all the *personae*.[36] As well as the images, the analysis of the dream carried out in Chapter III is partially given in the words of the various *personae*, in quite lucid psychological descriptions of such processes as suppression, and of the ego and the id.

It is soon evident that the dream images compose themselves into a surrealist landscape too, as in Guido's utterance of this Gothic and grotesque metaphor:

> Why do I laugh? Why, in the very gripe
> O' the jaws of death's gigantic skull, do I
> Grin back his grin, make sport of my own pangs?
> Why from each clashing of his molars, ground
> To make the devil bread from out my grist,
> Leaps out a spark of mirth, a hellish toy? (XI, 1035-40)

This image leads us into the analogy with "Childe Roland," for the old cripple writing Roland's epitaph has a "skull-like laugh," as does the gaping grotesque oak tree further on. The teeth are going to decapitate Guido like the guillotine; there are also references to decapitation in the quest of Roland, whose landscape is anthropomorphized into a human body. Decapitation is a recurring image in Guido's second monologue as one might expect. Many years ago he came upon "your fine axe in a frame, that falls / And so cuts off a man's head underneath " (XI, 184-185), but now this is to be his fate. Before the murder, however, mutilations and amputations in varying degrees occupied Guido's inner thoughts.[37] The guillotine is a torture machine which has an unambiguous function, in contrast to the engine or harrow, like Tophet's tool, with "rusty teeth of steel" whose function conjures up nebulous horrors. The guillotine is a "man-mutilating engine" which stands "both gay and grim" (XI, 207-209). Guido refers to the "brand-new engine" which will be tried out on his "body and soul" "prove / Represser of the pranksome!" (XI, 124-126). "Do you know," he asks, "what teeth you mean to try / The sharpness of, on this soft neck and throat?" (XI, 127-128).

In the prison Guido envisions the guillotine constantly, imagining in vivid realism its effect, as opposed to his easy death had he been allowed to live out his natural life: "I'm told one clot of blood extravasate / Ends one as certainly as Roland's sword" (XI, 303-304). Swords with their inherent symbolism abound in Guido's second monologue, as in this passage where he describes his suppressed passions with remarkable acumen:

> I, boast such passions? 'T was "Suppress them straight!
> "Or stay, we'll pick and choose before destroy:
> "Here's wrath in you, a serviceable sword,—
> "Beat it into a ploughshare! What 's this long
> "Lance-like ambition? Forge a pruning-hook,
> "May be of service when our vines grow tall!
> "But--sword used swordwise, spear thrust out as spear?
> "Anathema! Suppression is the word!" (XI, 1507-14)

The outcome of his suppression is to be blamed on those who preached to him. Guido, however, is not going to die by "Nature's way" but by

> Art's process with the engine here,
> When bowl and cord alike are crushed across,
> Bored between, bruised through?" (XI, 309-311)

Murder has been seen as an art before in Browning's poetry; notably in "The Laboratory" and "My Last Duchess." The Renaissance Count plans no such artistic murder of Pompilia. It is rather one of "Brute force," which he complains of, however, when it is directed at him:

> Brute force
> Cuts as he comes, breaks in, breaks on, breaks out
> O' the hard and soft of you: is that the same?
> A lithe snake thrids the hedge, makes throb no leaf:
> A heavy ox sets chest to brier and branch,
> Bursts somehow through, and leaves one hideous hole
> Behind him! (XI, 316-322)

There are two hills like bulls in Roland's landscape which help trap him where he seeks to be. He has been the "brute," perhaps, whose feet have "pashed" out the life of the vegetation, although he blames such destruction upon another creature, implicitly a dragon figure. Guido asks his confessors at the end:

> What do you know o' the world that's trodden flat
> And salted sterile with your daily dung,
> Leavened into a lump of loathsomeness? (XI, 1472-74)

The art of torture is alluded to throughout The Ring and the Book. In Book I, Browning describes Law torturing Guido to loosen his tongue—until they decide to "break the torture-engine thus!" Then Religion appears—to say she does not approve of torture—far too late (I, 981ff). Marriage is a worse torture, spiritual rather than physical, for both Pompilia and Guido.[38] Images of torture describe Pompilia's trials when it is being schemed to blacken her soul through driving her into Caponsacchi's arms (IV, 685-698). But the majority of images of torture, mutilation and decapitation occur in Guido's two monologues. They are divided between literal descriptions (sometimes in metaphor) of real instruments, and the use of engines of torture to symbolize spiritual, mental torments. Guido's preoccupation with torture is most revealing of his own unconscious, for he is the chief torturer in the poem, in terms of both self and others.

For Guido is not whole, but a fragmented being, separated body from soul. He does not see his world as the landscape through which Roland travels, for unlike him Guido never chooses to seek the Dark Tower, nor does he realize that all he fears and hates is part of himself. There are one or two literal quests which he makes (see V, 230-234) but they are journeys of deceit and violence directed outward. He never has the degree of self-knowledge to see his life with a pattern to it, nor does he truly acknowledge as his own those baser qualities of man(until the very end, perhaps) even by taking the somewhat positive step of "negation." He takes himself to be the "natural" man, thereby making that term unnatural.

Caponsacchi, in Browning's interpretation of him, is aware of his spiritual quest, of the journey to rescue the maiden chained to the rock, and to slay the dragon; although he ultimately fails, and develops a tongue-in-cheek attitude to his role as "hero" as this passage shows:

> --Yes,
> I rise in your esteem sagacious Sirs,
> Stand up a renderer of reasons, not
> The officious priest would personate Saint George
> For a mock Princess in undragoned days.
> What, the blood startles you? What, after all
> The priest who needs must carry sword on thigh
> May find imperative use for it? Then, there was
> A Princess, was a dragon belching flame,
> And should have been a Saint George also? (VI, 1768-77)

These words express Browning's and Caponsacchi's self-mockery; as well, they mock their respective audiences who did not believe in the myth's validity.

There is one place where Guido speaks of his life as a journey over a landscape, after he has described his renunciation of both the full priest's and the soldier's ways of life. He is told to go to Rome and seek marriage, as his raison d'être:

> I turned alike from the hill-side zig-zag thread
> Of way to the table-land a soldier takes,
> Alike from the low-lying pasture-place
> Where churchmen graze, recline and ruminate,
> --Ventured to mount no platform like my lords
> Who judge the world . . . . (V, 236-241)

Neither turf nor towers for Guido, then; rather he lives on a plateau level, helping, he modestly claims, both Church and Law. Later, in his second monologue, Guido describes his act of murder as not so much a crime as a blunder:

> At the worst, I stood in doubt
> On cross-road, took one path of many paths:
> It leads to the red thing, we all see now,
> But nobody saw at first: one primrose-patch
> In bank, one singing-bird in bush, the less,
> Had warned me from such wayfare: let me prove!
> Put me back to the cross-road, start afresh!
> Advise me when I take the first false step!
> Give me my wife: how should I use my wife,
> Love her or hate her? Prompt my action now! (XI, 954-963)

This passage, with its metaphor of analogy, not direct experience, is revealing to the degree that it departs from the dream imagery of "Childe Roland." At the cross-roads, or where he left the road, Roland seems to be falsely directed, acquiescing in the need for the quest to end some way. He leaves the easy path and finds himself on a grey pathless plain. And he comes not to the "red thing" but to the Dark Tower, although he sees evidence that violence has occurred to blight the landscape. He is willing, once finding the goal, to face death in some form, undaunted, and to become one with his brothers. Guido would pretend regret that he chose the wrong path, but blames others for not directing each step of the narrow way. His regret is not for violence done to Pompilia, but rather he is motivated by fear of the death waiting for him at the end of his "path." Guido's quest is still to save his "skin," not his soul. There was never any doubt, as he claims, as to whether he was going to use his wife with love or hatred. Later he sums up his plight in terms of the end of a pathway:

> And finally, after this long-drawn range
> Of affront and failure, failure and affront,—
> This path, 'twixt crosses leading to a skull,
> Paced by me barefoot, bloodied by my palms
> From the entry to the end,--there's light at length,
> A cranny of escape: appeal may be
> To the old man, to the father, to the Pope,
> For a little life. . . . (XI, 1769-76)

The images daringly link his death with Christ's passion, of which it becomes a grim parody.[39] In the first lines there is an echo of Roland's "whole world-wide wandering" and his heart springing to find "failure in its scope." Roland finds no cranny of escape but rather is in an enclosed trap at the end. We remember that a crack in the gorge was in psychological terms a way into the psyche.[40] The salvation which Guido seeks from the Pope could lead to self-knowledge if it were not that his whole effort is directed towards saving his body only.

One of the central animal images in "Childe Roland" is "Toads in a poisoned tank, / Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage--" those creatures who have savagely trampled the "Soil to a plash" in order to escape the invisible walls of a circular mews. There are recurrent images of traps, wild cats and toads in The Ring and the Book. Browning refers in Book I to "Arezzo, the man's town, / The woman's trap and cage and torture-place, / Also the stage where the priest played his part" (I, 501-503). A hundred lines later Browning describes in mythic language the rescue of Pompilia by her Saint George, and her subsequent meeting with

> . . . the angel of this life,
> Whose care is lest men see too much at once.
> He made the sign, such God-glimpse must suffice,
> Nor prejudice the Prince o' the Power of the Air,
> Whose ministration piles us overhead
> What we call, first, earth's roof and, last, heaven's floor,
> Now grate o' the trap, then outlet of the cage:
> So took the lady, left the priest alone,
> And once more canopied the world with black. (I, 594-602)

She is released from the cage and trap of life when she enters into death. In her own monologue she creates a metaphor for life which contains impressions of the heath scene in King Lear:

> The hovel is life: no matter what dogs bit
> Or cats scratched in the hovel I break from,
> All outside is lone field, moon and such peace--
> Flowing in, filling up as with a sea
> Whereon comes Someone, walks fast on the white,
> Jesus Christ's self. . . . (VII, 366-371)

The Christian vision of life outside the "hovel" (contrasting poignantly with Guido's Christ image above) resembles symbolically Jung's womb of life from whence we come and the sea to which we return. When Pompilia waits for Caponsacchi to rescue her, she remembers an old rhyme,

> Of how a virgin, for the faith of God,
> Hid herself, from the Paynims that pursued,
> In a cave's heart; until a thunderstone,
> Wrapped in a flame, revealed the couch and prey. . . .
> (VII, 1390-93)

But the virgin seizes the fire, fixes its flesh, until

> Lay in her hand a calm cold dreadful sword
> She brandished till pursuers strewed the ground,
> So did the souls within them die away,
> As o'er the prostrate bodies, sworded, safe,
> She walked forth to the solitudes and Christ:
> So should I grasp the lightning and be saved! (VII, 1398-1403)

The lightning is both Caponsacchi and the sword she does wield against Guido. Such unconscious "rhymes" running through her mind reveal that Pompilia is by no means passive. She will take masculine weapons of war in hand in defence of truth and love, and in order to escape outside this life to Christ and "the solitudes," the calm sea.

Guido has already been shown as the trapped creature, when he is being tortured or is anticipating the guillotine. There are other less physical traps, shown concretely through imagery. When he is baulked by the Comparini's claim that Pompilia is no daughter of theirs and therefore Pietro's estates are not to go to Guido, this is one more humiliation to bear, as Other Half-Rome portrays:

> Hence new disaster—here no outlet seemed;
> Whatever the fortune of the battle-field,
> No path whereby the fatal man might march
> Victorious, wreath on head and spoils in hand,
> And back turned full upon the baffled foe,—
> Nor cranny whence, desperate and disgraced,
> Stripped to the skin, he might be fain to crawl
> Worm-like, and so away with his defeat
> To other fortune and the novel prey. (III, 689-697)

For Guido there is no way into his unconscious where he can bare himself like Lear's "poor, bare forked animal" and shed all ego. To leave in disgrace is the alternative to basking in victory but neither pathway reveals itself. However, he never chooses to face the apocalpyse, to be saved and born again. Rather as a worm he would prey elsewhere. For the prisoners in the mews in "Childe Roland," similarly, no footsteps exist into or away from "that fell cirque."

It is "Nature" who will set the prisoners free by a purging fire. Guido calls on the Pope, then berates his lack of forgiveness. If he had asked Peter where he was going, the Saint would have answered, "To free the prisoner and forgive his fault!" (XI, 328).

If Guido is in a trap of his own psychological design, he has certainly created traps for others, as in the letters he forged. Caponsacchi asks, during the first trial:

> ". . . see if the miscreant
> "The man who tortured thus the woman, thus
> "Have not both laid the trap and fixed the lure
> "Over the pit should bury body and soul!" (III, 1356-59)

The tortured and trapped Guido was once the torturer.

The wild cats in the iron cage, and the toads in a poisoned tank are motifs also in The Ring and the Book. The cat we first meet in the poem is Browning's description of Canon Girolamo, one of Guido's brothers from among the "dark brotherhood" who had helped him on his rise from hell:

> Two obscure goblin creatures, fox-faced this,
> Cat-clawed the other, called his next of kin
> By Guido the main monster. . . . (I, 549-551)

Guido, too, is compared to a wild cat in a number of places.[41] A more striking parallel with the "Childe Roland" passage is also found in the poet's first monologue. He describes the horrific scene of Guido's prison speech in which he reveals the other side of himself, or the underside, so cunningly hidden in his monologue as "Count."[42] The Cardinal and the Abate crouch "On a stone bench in a close fetid cell," (I, 1286)

> . . . both of old styled friends
> O' the thing part man part monster in the midst,
> So changed is Franceschini's gentle blood.
> The tiger-cat screams now, that whined before,

> That pried and tried and trod so gingerly,
> Till in its silkiness the trap-teeth join;
> Then you know how the bustling fury foams. (I, 1293-99)

This passage brings together the images of torture, trap, wild cat, from the earlier poem, and creates a pattern in this work for those elements. (As well, the process of metamorphosis is suggested, to be completed by Guido in his own words in Book XI.) In the dream poem such images were seen as projections externalized from the dreamer's unconscious. Here, they are consciously evoked, but again their effect is to reveal an underlying level to the personae. Any individual persona may use images unconsciously; when used as a pattern throughout The Ring and the Book they reveal the poet's own vision of multitudinous variety in the world.

The wild cat as an image for Guido is of course often transformed into the more powerful wolf. The wolf is one of the central animal images for Guido, just as the lamb is for Pompilia.[43] There are other wild animals of this class, the lion among them. Bottini explains Pompilia's need to leave her husband's home to seek her parents. However,

> . . . 'twixt home and home
> Lies a long road with many a danger rife,
> Lions by the way and serpents in the path,
> To rob and ravish . . . (IX, 585-588)

Therefore it is proper that she have a witness who can say how "white she walks / I' the mire she wanders through" (IX, 592-593). (Of course Bottini, in the way he phrases his defence, manages to cast doubt on the role of Caponsacchi.) When Karshish encountered a black lynx in the desert during his journey it was symbolic of his physical passions ready to become unleashed, a portent for the imminent revelation.

The toads found in the christening-font and the poisoned tank, in "Gold Hair" and "Childe Roland," are symbolic of evil amidst innocence, and of animalistic frustration, respectively. The toad images in The Ring and the Book carry these meanings too. Half-Rome speaks of "Guido poisoned to the bone" but receiving one last, worst, drop when he learns of Pompilia being released from the convent to give birth to his son: "One master-squeeze from screw shall bring to birth / The hoard i' the heart o' the toad, hell's quintessence" (II, 1376-77). The "birth" in this description is a grotesque perversion of Pompilia bearing Gaetano. Guido uses the same hellish image to describe how he hangs on in his palace, unrevenged, after the duplicity of the Comparini has been thrust upon him:

> . . . I supped, ate the coarse bread, drank the wine
> Weak once, now acrid with the toad's-head-squeeze,
> My wife's bestowment . . . .(V, 1388-90)

Already noted in the previous section has been that "witches' brew" of "sulphur, snake and toad" (V, 636) which symbolizes the loathing Pompilia holds for Guido.

The tower which is at the end of Childe Roland's quest, and which embodies his goal, is significant when it appears in its various guises in The Ring and the Book. Pompilia as a baby is supposedly found in a "blind" dwelling "black at base, / Blinking at top,--the sign we know of what,--" (IV, 151-152) and the same speaker, Tertium Quid, describes Violante's crime of deceit over the baby as "Black hard cold / Crime you kick up with your foot / I' the middle of a field" (IV, 229-231). Half-Rome sees Pompilia's hiding place and the scene of the murders as that "blind mute villa lurking by the gate" (II, 1365), and implies that Caponsacchi might have found it a convenient half-way house. There was an old tower at Castelnuovo, where earlier the fugitives were caught in their flight (VI, 1397-1400). Caponsacchi, as Perseus rescuing his Andromeda, only initially succeeds in unchaining her from the rock which is Guido's fortress, but he fails to rescue her from the "blind" villa which is like Roland's "blind" tower. There is a symbolic link between the Dark Tower, villa, fortresses of various kinds, and the rock where Andromeda was chained, all representing the body, just as the various beasts are linked: the beast who has gone before Roland on his quest, and who well may be identical with the protagonist, if he is not the dragon; the various sea beasts and monsters of the deep often used to symbolize Guido; the many appearances of the dragon itself.

The psychological implications arising from the dream images in "Childe Roland" may be summarized briefly as follows: the protagonist on his dream quest projects externally onto the landscape all the frustrations and repressions within himself, in processes of negation and desexualization. The dream-work of condensation, displacement, and secondary elaboration is also represented in the poem's form. What Roland fears is himself, his own body whose imprisonment he sees in physical terms. The landscape in effect is his body. The damages done to it are due to repression channelled into aggressive acts, or at least subconscious aggressive desires which symbolically wreak havoc on the surroundings. Much is seen in images of death, for Roland fears death at the outset. Yet all the fears are faced up to, and passed by, in the course of the journey, without actual physical violence occurring. The moment of being trapped in the ring of mountains, which blazen forth with the figures of his fellow knights, is a moment of self-knowledge. In the heart of this scene is the ambiguous tower, his goal, yet his fate too. Undaunted, Roland admits the final apocalypse by blowing a clarion call on his "slug-horn." In meeting and knowing himself he overcomes death, and one can see the moment as a life-in-death incarnation following a death-in-life journeying.

The events in The Ring and the Book are real, historically, and in terms of taking place outside the dream world of the earlier poem. But there is an underlying drama carried forward by the imagery and allusions, a drama of suppression(through over-cultivation) leading to outward aggressive acts more animal-like than the actions of animals. According to report (Guido's, reported further by Other Half-Rome) Pompilia called Guido "The beast below the beast in brutishness!" (III, 1299). There is no subsequent moment of revelation or apocalypse for Guido, it appears, to redeem the beast in him. On the other hand, Pompilia and Caponsacchi, who have some share in the dream-nightmare imagery, are given a vision of truth because their innocence is redeemable. It is necessary to keep the whole poem in mind when seeking the "Childe Roland" pattern, even though it is Guido's soul which is crucially at stake.

The theme of repression is evoked by imagery which recalls the gaunt red horse in Roland's dream and the old mill-horse from "Fra Lippo Lippi." Guido describes how he has always yoked himself to tread the path of duty, first to the Church, although

> . . . mates of mine
> Have thrown their careless hoofs up at her call
> "Forsake the clover and come drag my wain!"
> There they go cropping: I protruded nose

> To halter, bent my back of docile beast,
> And now am whealed, one wide wound all of me,
> For being found at the eleventh hour o' the day
> Padding the mill-track, not neck-deep in grass. . . .
> (V, 130-137)

In this next metaphor Guido regrets that he is so soon to be made into chaff, while there is so much "juice" in him yet:

> Life!
> How I could spill this overplus of mine
> Among those hoar-haired, shrunk-shanked odds and ends
> Of body and soul old age is chewing dry!
> Those windlestraws that stare while purblind death
> Mows here, mows there, makes hay of juicy me,
> And misses just the bunch of withered weed
> Would brighten hell and streak its smoke with flame!
> How the life I could shed yet never shrink,
> Would drench their stalks with sap like grass in May!
> (XI, 143-152)

The only good of grass is to make chaff, and Guido has learned too late that he should have kicked up his heels sooner. As death threatens he sees himself, erroneously, as abounding in life and life's blood. All his years of suppression have suddenly made him value his own life when it is threatened.

Guido believes that society was designed to punish pleasure, make it illegal: (thus if it pleased you to kill a man this was forbidden--instead you must go to the law). If you help yourself to pleasure then you must expect pain as the forfeit:

> For, pleasure being the sole good in the world,
> Anyone's pleasure turns to someone's pain,
> So, law must watch for everyone,--say we,
> Who call things wicked that give too much joy,
> And nickname mere reprisal, envy makes,
> Punishment: quite right! thus the world goes round.
> (XI, 529-534)

Although Guido has elements of the Benthamite here, he also speaks a pre-Freudian language at times which conveys the instinctual animal qualities in him. This is especially true in his second monologue, it must be reiterated, where Guido seems to shed most of his mask of Count-hood.[44] (Yet the second Adam is another kind of mask, even if it reveals more of the soul's inner torment.) Guido here seems to give a poetic paraphrase of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" or Civilization and its Discontents. We cannot condone Guido because we recognize the message: Browning does, from the outset, make a conscious moral judgment of him. Guido uses such arguments to rationalize his position and his views are always warped by extreme bitterness and self-seeking. Nevertheless, his "manifesto" here is very similar to the one voiced earlier by Fra Lippo Lippi, with whom we sympathized. Lippi recognizes his own repressions, however, before they emerge in aggressive acts, and they can be dissipated harmlessly, if at some cost in compromise.

Guido, who is paying law's price for risking law's infringement, refuses repentance as if he had broken "God's precept."

> Enough of the hypocrites. But you, Sirs, you--
> Who never budged from litter where I lay,
> And buried snout i' the draff-box while I fed,
> Cried amen to my creed's one article--
> "Get pleasure, 'scape pain,--give your preference
> "To the immediate good, for time is brief,
> "And death ends good and ill and everything!
> "What 's got is gained, what 's gained soon is gained twice,
> "And,--inasmuch as faith gains most,--feigns faith!"
> (XI, 764-772)

Thus was Guido taught. Yet when he follows the precepts, "using the old license" but not dreaming of harm any more "than snow in harvest," harm falls (XI, 780-81) and he is left undefended, receiving blood for wine. Why did the Church not preach the dangers, either in words or in deeds with "tongues of flame"? Why was he even aided and abetted to play the wolf in sheep's clothing (XI, 824-826)? Guido does a skilful job of using rhetoric to absolve himself of responsibility, but his hypocrisy blended with extreme cynicism outdoes that of the clerics whom he attacks (in a parallel to Molière's Don Juan). At the same time Browning was well aware of the hypocrisy in institutions such as Law and the Church; he lets Lippi voice a very clear poetic description of repression which is directed at the convent.

Guido's language reaches highest intensity, once more, when he discusses the interpersonal relationship of his marriage to Pompilia. Here he feels most highly frustrated; it is these frustrations which he blames for his aggressive act. (The Pope will lay it on another cause.) He plays upon the old theme of society telling him, in effect, to suppress his passions (XI, 1507-1514, quoted above). But long repression results in the Nietzschean "witches' brew" when the civilized man explodes:

> My nature, when the outrage was too gross,
> Widened itself in outlet over-wide
> By way of answer, sought its own relief
> With more of fire and brimstone than you wished.
> All your own doings: preachers, blame yourselves!
> (XI, 1515-19)

Julia Wedgwood criticized the conception of Guido--his crime did not fit the man, nor did such a brute merit the elaborate treatment. Here is Browning's reply:

> You write here--[February 21, 1869] "Guido's part is simply one of stupid brutality" to which neither does the cultivation, etc *"fit on,"* nor with the keenness, subtlety, paganism, etc--nay, even if I understand you, even the treachery, intrigue, and Iago-qualities seem inappropriate to the product.
>
> Why, I almost have you at an unfair disadvantage, in the fact that the whole story is *true*! How do *you* account for the "mere brutal hacking Pompilia to pieces" in a nobleman thirty years long the intimate of Cardinals: is this the case of a drunken operative that kicks his wife to death because she has no money for more gin? But I won't begin and tell my own story over yet another time,--I am too glad to

> get done with it. We differ apparently in our conception of what gross wickedness can be effected by cultivated minds--I believe the grossest-- all the more, by way of reaction from the enforced habit of self denial which is the condition of men's receiving culture. Guido tried the over-refined way for four years, and in his rage at its unsuccess let the natural man break out.[45]

The letter and the lines quoted above are in accordance with the explorations and discoveries of many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers: Nietzsche and Gide in particular, but one thinks of Thomas Mann and Conrad also. Indeed, André Gide in his Journals gives us a lucid analysis of the relationship between Browning and his masks which helps to explain the intensity with which a Guido is depicted:

> I come to understand that objective depiction often means a superficial representation; but, for a profound depiction, the poet must experience in himself what is to be the subject of his picture. And Browning does not exactly confess himself in Bishop Blougram, in Sludge, in Andrea del Sarto, to be sure--yet in order to discover the form of those characters, his elastic soul deigns to identify itself in turn with each of them for a time. And since one cannot really understand a feeling without experiencing it oneself, I submit that he depicts himself, if one admits that he becomes in turn each of them.[46]

The final sentence would allow a subtle identification, then, to exist between Guido and his poetic creator at the moment of creation. The whole story may be "true" as Browning claims, but it is also true that he puts on the skin of this over-refined victim of culture who breaks loose as the natural man.

It has been said that evil is the rejection of the natural order, which results in the destruction of self.[47] We have Browning's word that it is the natural man who breaks out after so much culture and refinement (a Cleon of another age), that release is forced and violent. For Childe Roland this knowledge of his inner nature is experienced surrealistically so that he is spared self-destruction. (He wakes from the dream so that it may then be re-created.)

Guido blames the Church, as the chief suppressor of the flesh, for his predicament. Browning's conception of Christianity as is evident in earlier poems does not include such suppression; he rather sees the advent of Christianity as an event in time, and out of it, which frees man's soul and body so that they are one in mutual forgetfulness of self. He would likely have agreed with Conrad, though, that restraint is necessary if civilization is in fact to be more than a veneer--it needs to have depth and substance which come from experience and knowledge, but also from love. Guido, so long affiliated with the Church, takes the Pagan position in his second monologue. The following passage is significant in itself and in the light of the Pope's discussion of the pre-Christian age which will be examined later:

> So, the living truth
> Revealed to strike Pan dead, ducks low at last,
> Prays leave to hold its own and live good days
> Provided it go masque grotesquely, called
> Christian not Pagan. Oh, you purged the sky
> Of all gods save the One, the great and good,
> Clapped hands and triumphed! But the change came fast:
> The inexorable need in man for life--
> (Life, you may mulct and minish to a grain
> Out of the lump, so that the grain but live)
> Laughed at your substituting death for life,
> And bade you do your worst: which worst was done
> In just that age styled primitive and pure
> When Saint this, Saint that, dutifully starved,
> Froze, fought with beasts, was beaten and abused,
> And finally ridded of his flesh by fire,
> He kept life-long unspotted from the world! (XI, 1975-91)

The next age mutinies, however, and wants to enjoy "old liberty," and Law winks, pardons, does not hold man to the letter, nor does Omnipotence stop the sin. Enter, at this stage, Guido! For Browning, the strange alliance of Pagan and Christian forms or even spirit would not be anathema. But for him Christianity was not the religion of death but of life; this has certainly been shown already in the examination of the religious monologues. It does not demand the subjugation of the flesh nor an extreme asceticism either.

Guido, in his defence which is really a confession, sees himself, ironically, as the devil, and baits his confessors as follows:

> Abate, cross your breast and count your beads
> And exorcize the devil, for here he stands
> And stiffens in the bristly nape of neck,
> Daring you drive him hence! You, Christians both?
> (XI, 554-557)

The devil they know is better than the devil they do not know. For Guido implies that Christianity is only a mask, a form, but that if it came true "in the twinkling of an eye" that Rome truly believed in Christianity, why "What an explosion, how the fragments fly / Of what was surface, mask, and make-believe!" (XI, 624-625). Browning never fails to allow the charlatan or hypocrite to examine those same qualities in others.

Even in the depths of what appears to be soul searching, Guido blames the Church and society for the darkness which he discovers within, using this paradox:

> . . . I have gone inside my soul
> And shut its door behind me: 't is your torch
> Makes the place dark: the darkness let alone
> Grows tolerable twilight: one may grope
> And get to guess at length and breadth and depth.
> (XI, 2291-95)

Christopher Ricks makes the following biographical observation:

> The 'morbid self-consciousness' of which [John Stuart] Mill spoke, the 'curious idealization of self-worship'--these are morbid and curious because what they most seek is the assurance that a self is really there. Browning shared the Victorian nightmare: of gazing into an empty mirror.[48]

He then paraphrases a dialogue between Browning and Elizabeth Barrett:

> 'Did you ever feel afraid of your own soul, as I have done?,' Elizabeth asked him--and described to him the plan of a play: My plan was of a

> man haunted by his own soul, . . (making her a separate personal Psyche, a dreadful, beautiful Psyche)--the man being haunted and terrified through all the turns of life by her.
> 'The subject of your play is tempting indeed,' Browning had replied . . . .[49]

Browning felt without prompting, witness Sordello, that little else than the soul was worth study. As described by Miss Barrett the soul could be the artist's soul of Tennyson's "Palace of Art," for example. But if soul may be translated as the unconscious, then it is represented by the tortuous depths reached by Guido. Soul as consciousness attained through the body Guido has not yet achieved, however.

Guido speaks knowledgeably of masks and of unmasking, but it is only when the cell is opened and his execution is imminent that his own mask finally flies off. He has begun to see, rationally, that it is death that gives an otherwise meaningless existence its meaning:

> Undoubtedly
> The soul 's condensed and, twice itself, expands
> To burst thro' life, in alternation due,
> Into the other state whate'er it prove.
> You never know what life means till you die:
> Even throughout life, 't is death that makes life live,
> Gives it whatever the significance. (XI, 2371-77)

This last statement acquires a disturbing second meaning when one considers the deaths which gave Guido's life its significance in the recent past. A few lines further on, Guido reaches the climax of his less rhetorical, more personal outcry:

> Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,
> Is--save me notwithstanding! Life is all!
> I was just stark mad,--let the madman live
> Pressed by as many chains as you please pile!
> Don't open! Hold me from them! I am yours,
> I am the Granduke's--no, I am the Pope's!
> Abate,--Cardinal,--Christ,--Maria,--God, . . .
> Pompilia, will you let them murder me? (XI, 2420-27)

The irony, pathos, drama—and truth--in the last line act on multiple levels. Roma King writes:

> [Guido's] last cry of terror, one of his first genuine acts, might be called a triumph . . . . Even if Guido remains in wickedness, choosing to be damned rather than saved, he does so as a responsible man, not as a cultural mannikin.[50]

Surely in the early part of the speech he is still bargaining, pleading for his life on the grounds of insanity. King modifies the triumph somewhat:

> His final outcry. . . might signal either a conversion or mere terror . . . . Browning's interests are psychological. Guido comes to discover manhood rather than sainthood . . . . The last cry signals the ambivalent triumph and terror of newly achieved manhood. Whether it leads to salvation or damnation in the usual sense is relatively unimportant. . . .
> Actually Guido's gesture at the end of Book XI is as indeterminate as Childe Roland's at the end of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and less capable of single interpretation.[51]

I feel that Guido's cry has much of the significance--and ambiguity--of Kurtz's cry of recognition and summation at the moment of his death in Heart of Darkness: "The horror! The horror!" And one might ask, with Marlow, this same question of Guido's last words in the poem: "Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?"[52] Of course, one could only ask this question at the "supreme moment" when Guido's head is on the executioner's block, a moment when we do not see him.

Alternately, Guido's cry may be no more than a blind clutching at life, a life during which he has never, even in this episode, fully known himself. Morse Peckham, in an excellent discussion of mask and personality in Browning's work, makes this summation of the three Guido's we in fact eventually meet:

> In his first defense Guido presents himself as the supporter of the prerogatives of the male, the defender of the rights of husbands, the supporter of the social order, one who accepts with full responsibility his position as a nobleman. When this does not work he presents himself as a wolf, one who preys upon mankind, ruthlessly and savagely. And this is the conception of Guido that Browning critics have accepted. Here is the real Guido at last. But the fact is that when he is faced with execution this mask evaporates and Guido is revealed as nothing, one who implores Pompilia herself to save him. He is not even a wolf, and that self-conception was again a rationalizing strategy to provide himself with self-respect. Reduced to extremity, Guido can maintain no mask and reveals himself as merely an organism struggling only for continued existence.
>
> Does Browning mean that any man so reduced would reveal the hollowness of his masks in the same way, that there is a point in human extremity in which the distinction between hero and villain, the good and the bad, evaporates?[53]

Under the multiplicity of animal images and analogies in Guido's speech there may ultimately be nothing, which is the horror. For Caliban, too, suddenly facing his maker in fear and trembling, all is reduced to a cry. But that is not to say that every cry, or every silence, is an acknowledgment that life itself is empty at the core. Peckham tells us that Caponsacchi, too, is reduced to a cry at the end of his monologue, when his quests to save Pompilia have come to nothing: "O great, just, good God! Miserable me! (VI, 2105). Surely there is a great difference between these cries. It should be noted that Pompilia's monologue ends with an affirmation: "And I rise." If we reconsider Childe Roland, there is a difference, too, for although his blowing of the horn may be the equivalent of a cry when words have no meaning, it is again a cry with content, in the context of truly facing death. In the end it may still be argued that the word "Pompilia" on his lips gives Guido's cry, too, great meaning in a positive sense. Perhaps he is finally the "poor, bare forked animal"--man himself.

Guido has already voiced, slightly before the end, the changes that he feels death will "ring" in. He sets his analogy in the framework of Ovid's Metamorphoses, making himself the animal to which he is more frequently compared:

So, let death atone!
So ends mistake, so end mistakers!--end
Perhaps to recommence,--how should I know?
Childish, preposterous, impossible,
But some such fate as Ovid could foresee,--
Byblis in fluvium, let the weak soul end
In water, sed Lycaon in lupum, but
The strong become a wolf for evermore!
Change that Pompilia to a puny stream
Fit to reflect the daisies on its bank!
Let me turn wolf, be whole, and sate, for once,--
Wallow in what is now a wolfishness
Coerced too much by the humanity
That's half of me as well! Grow out of man,
Glut the wolf-nature,--what remains but grow
Into the man again, be man indeed
And all man? Do I ring the changes right?
Deformed, transformed, reformed, informed, conformed!
(XI, 2045-63)

The ringing words symbolize Guido's awareness and scorn of the world's judgment of him, but with an undertone of pleading that he is not so far gone in wolfishness as to fail to regain his humanity. Guido continues in this passage by creating a metaphor for another transformation. This time his pent-up instincts are seen as a thread of fire winding up through a mountain to emerge out of the earth on the mountain-top, as fit for its place as the streamlet (Pompilia) is fit for the vale. In nature such forces as his would have their outlet, denied to him, he claims, as a mere man. His pride in himself as natural man is very evident here, if "natural" be taken to mean man's animalistic side. Metamorphoses recur throughout The Ring and the Book; this one, as Guido sees for himself is, in microcosmic form, the change which does occur in him between Book V and Book IX, when the sheep's clothing is shed. There is a more crucial transformation necessary if Guido is to receive personal and divine atonement or salvation, however. The Pope expresses Guido's need in Book X, Pompilia prays for it. And Guido? We have only his last cry to judge by.

A very strong presentation of Guido's dark night of the soul is uttered not by himself, but by the soldier-saint Caponsacchi. We know him in his guise as Perseus or St. George, the would-be rescuer of Pompilia. Although he obviously worships the goodness, purity, and truth of Pompilia, there is ambiguity in his physical feelings towards her. Is he, as the Pope implies even in his praise, merely an ineffectual society priest lured to a beautiful girl, but impotent after all in the face of concrete evil? I think Caponsacchi's analysis of Guido's place in the universe, or, actually, in the underworld, reveals the speaker as garbed in moral armor, indeed ready to rise in anger against evil, to see it fallen and not exalted. He begins mildly enough with his depiction of Guido as snake, which is one of his recurring animal roles as usurper of innocence in Eden:

> I think he will be found (indulge so far!)
> Not to die so much as slide out of life,
> Pushed by the general horror and common hate
> Low, lower,--left o' the very ledge of things,
>
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
>
> And thus I see him slowly and surely edged
> Off the table-land whence life upsprings
> Aspiring to be immortality,
> As the snake, hatched on hill-top by mischance,
> Despite his wriggling, slips, slides, slidders down
> Hill-side, lies low and prostrate on the smooth
> Level of the outer place, lapsed in the vale:
> So I lose Guido in the loneliness,
> Silence and dusk, till at doleful end,
> At the horizontal line, creation's verge,
> From what just is to absolute nothingness--
> Whom is it, straining onward still, he meets?
> (VI, 1910-13, 1921-32)

Guido is lost on the plain like Childe Roland, with no infinite moment to intersect the horizontal of life. He does not reach a Dark Tower, however, but instead will meet with his Doppelgänger, Judas:

> Judas, made monstrous by much solitude!
> The two are at one now! Let them love their love
> That bites and claws like hate, or hate their hate
> That mops and mows and makes as it were love!
> There, let them each tear each in devil's-fun,
> Or fondle this the other while malice aches--
> Both teach, both learn detestability!
> Kiss him the kiss, Iscariot! Pay that back,
> That snatch o' the slaver blistering on your lip,
> By the better trick, the insult he spared Christ--
> Lure him the lure o' the letters, Arentine!
> Lick him o'er slimy-smooth with jelly-filth
> O' the verse-and-prose pollution in love's guise!
> The cockatrice is with the basilisk!
> There let them grapple, denizens o' the dark,
> Foes or friends, but indissolubly bound
> In their one spot out of the ken of God
> Or care of man, for ever and ever more! (VI, 1937-54)

The horrible, grotesque imagery which climaxes Caponsacchi's condemnation of Guido for his deceit with the letters (for this passage does not refer specifically to the murders), conveys moral, psychological horror with some of the strongest imagery in the poem. This preludes the imagery with which Guido in effect condemns himself in Book XI, as we have seen. Guido, the snake, becomes Fallen Man, a Judas and worse than a Judas. The Perseus-Andromeda myth links with the Christian one as the sea beast becomes the betrayer of Christ-like Pompilia. The two figures in the wasteland are linked like brothers, as fellow "denizens o' the dark" who will "grapple" as did the wild animals imprisoned in "Childe Roland." Caponsacchi brands Guido a traitor of a worse kind than Roland's fellow knights. The strong, virile language is also bitter and scathing; if we hold the view that Browning identifies more with Caponsacchi than with any of the other personae, perhaps his feelings of revulsion towards his creation Guido are most sharply revealed in this extended passage. However, one must not forget the dramatization of character, the revelation of the persona, and all the multi-patterns of animal imagery in monologues of the other principal players, when Caponsacchi's condemnation is evaluated.

## E: The Pope: The Central Truth?

Browning might well sympathize with Caponsacchi as the figure of action in a crisis. Indeed, from his youth the Perseus-Andromeda myth and its counterparts in the "real" world were imbued in his soul. However, as a man who voices the Word of God, the Pope is often considered to be Browning's spokesman in The Ring and the Book. I do not feel that this is a necessary assumption to make, although I grant that much of the Pope's theology is Browning's interpretation of nineteenth-century theology, as we find also in the earlier religious monologues. Although Guido is given the monologue following the Pope's judgment of him in God's name, and although his monologues give him a larger voice than the poet himself, in terms of their length, the Pope's monologue may be agreed to contain more objective as well as divine appraisal than any other persona's, and to contain if not the central Truth, at least a coming together of the prismatic fragments into a purer light. He also raises the monologues of Pompilia and Caponsacchi with authority into this light. Since I believe that the wholeness of The Ring and the Book depends not on the moral judgment or truth in one book, but on all its parts, be they ever so dark as Guido, I choose not to call the Pope's monologue the central one. But it does occupy the same place in the poem's scheme as do the religious monologues in Browning's poetry of the middle period.[54]

The Pope, in untangling and clarifying for himself, at least, the massive welter of words which have made up the cases, uses significantly fewer images, metaphors, and similes from nature. Often when he uses them they function not in terms of their concreteness but as analogies pointing to a more spiritual level, or contrasting strongly with things spiritual. This is entirely fitting, since in the balance of nature and spirit, we would expect the Pope to have made most of the explorations of body and matter, and extended himself long before into an affinity with spirit. He, too, still needs words, and concrete analogies, to express his concept of evil and innocence, however. His role is to bind the fragments into some semblance of unity to the best of his ability, for he does not claim infallibility.

> If some acuter wit, fresh probing, sound
> This multifarious mass of words and deeds
> Deeper, and reach through guilt to innocence,
> I shall face Guido's ghost nor blench a jot. (X, 261-264)

If he hesitates, then,

> It is because I need to breathe awhile,
> Rest, as the human right allows, review
> Intent the little seeds of act, my tree,--
> The thought, which clothed in deed, I give the world
> At chink of bell and push of arrased door. (X, 278-282)

In a sense he is the supreme Poet, and the supreme resuscitator of the Word and truth; as DeVane says, the Pope condemns the lie and evil in order to rescue truth.[55]

Will the Pope, should he die today, be questioned on "thy fruit, the latest act of thine" (X, 341)? No, there will be no words or questions at "God's judgment bar!"

None of this vile way by the barren words
Which, more than any deed, characterize
Men as made subject to a curse; so speech--
That still bursts o'er some lie which lurks inside,
As the split skin across the coppery snake,
And most denotes man! (X, 349-354)

Man cannot speak without telling a lie, even to describe a rose; it is in the nature of man and, a very modern concept, in the nature of language. The problem had been one for Browning, as poet, since he struggled with the form and content of Sordello.

Therefore these flithy rags of speech, this coil
Of statement, comment, query and response,
Tatters all too contaminate for use,
Have no renewing: He, the Truth, is, too,
The Word. (X, 373-377)

The Word is silent. Yet in spite of the Pope's judgment, Browning could not choose to undo the multitudinous world he has created with word, image, metaphor, and symbol. His position as poet is ambiguous; however, although the Pope may give the penultimate judgment of Guido and of the words of man, he himself is but one facet of the poem, whose life is in language and in the very process of attaining whatever truth exists.

The Pope, too, after he points to the Word--which is Love, and the base of the triangle formed of "Power, Wisdom, Goodness,--God:" "The central truth" (X, 1358ff.,1634)--turns to words to review the case against Guido and the other four miscreants, and to judge Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the other chief figures in the drama. The Pope's imagery reinforces the patterns of innocence and experience, good and evil, which were traced earlier. I will summarize from the monologue the major images he attaches to each of the characters.

The Pope builds an elaborate animal metaphor describing Guido and linking him with Sludge and Caliban through the imagery. For Guido is a type of slug:

> Rather, he shrinks up like the ambiguous fish,
> Detaches flesh from shell and outside show,
> And steals by moonlight (I have seen the thing)
> In and out, now to prey and now to skulk. (X, 486-489)

When in danger he hides in his shell, the Church, but,

> Do tides abate and sea-fowl hunt i' the deep?
> Already is the slug from out its mew,
> Ignobly faring with all loose and free,
> Sand-fly and slush-worm at their garbage-feast,
> A naked blotch no better than they all . . . . (X, 495-500)

When Law catches him at last,

> . . . the foul thing of its carrion-prey
> Behold, he points to shell left high and dry,
> Pleads 'But the case out yonder is myself!' (X, 504-506)

No, rebuts the Pope, the thing itself, the inner creature, is the true Guido, not his "outside." The Pope makes Guido a slug, then, not a great denizen of the deep as he is sometimes depicted by other personae.

The Pope's further analysis of the falsely disguised man partly answers Julia Wedgwood's charge, cited above, that there could be no creature such as Guido in nature:

> For I find this black mark impinge the man,
> That he believes in just the vile of life.
> Low instinct, base pretension, are these truth?
> Then, that aforesaid armour, probity
> He figures in, is falsehood scale on scale . . . . (X,510-515)

In Philip Drew's clever review of Altick and Louck's Browning's Roman Murder Story a different point of view is expressed. Agreeing that the parallel between Guido and Caliban won him over, Drew continues:

> Even so I should want to relate the poem to what came after it as well as to what came before. I'd even be prepared to consider the point that all the long poems of the 1870s are in a sense Browning's attempts to convince himself that Guido really was wrong and that there was some authentication for human values in a world without God and E.B.B. This

kind of argument perhaps doesn't add much to our understanding of Fifine or The Inn Album, but it does indicate something of the power of the amoral, inverted universe realized in Book Eleven, if it haunted Browning and had to be confronted and exorcised in poem after poem.[56] The Pope on the level of divine knowledge and Pompilia on the level of divine intuition are to constitute a moral, upright universe, but Guido's monologue follows the Pope's and does leave a strong lasting impression.

The Pope, nevertheless, confirms that Guido, having gone beyond the natural man, is sunk "past level of the brute" (X, 541). He attributes this fall not to the brutish appetite for sex, unrequited, but to "the lust for money: to get gold,-- / Why, lie, rob, if it must be, murder!" (X, 543-544). Guido's soul is a "money-bag." (However, it will be recalled that gold itself is a sexual symbol in some cases.) His lust for gold replaces love and he ultimately sees it hiding (metaphorically) in his son Gaetano's curls, which leads him to murder the others. The Pope's explanation of Guido's crimes seems an oversimplification, and Guido reveals a much more complex set of subconscious motivations (however much he overstates his own case to rationalize his position).

The Pope does see lust, "hell's own blue tint" in Girolamo, the brother, however. Guido is the red, violent figure of wolfish visage. Paul's colour is yellow and he is the crafty fox. The mother is the grey hag who gave these "abortions birth" (X, 869-924).

Pompilia, the victim of lies, suspicions and finally of the knife, is lifted up again by the Pope, reaffirmed and reconsecrated in her purity.

> First of the first,
> Such I pronounce Pompilia, then as now
> Perfect in whiteness: stoop thou down, my child,
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> Let me look at thee in the flesh as erst,
> Let me enjoy the old clean linen garb,
> Not the new splendid vesture! (X, 1004-11)

Her soul is "earth's flower,"as fine in its way as Michael's,crowned and armed. "Seven years a gardener of the untoward ground " (X, 1031) the Pope can say that "At least one blossom makes me proud at eve / Born 'mid the briers of my enclosure!" (X, 1034-35). The Pope has no illusions about man's fallen state; his reward is to discover the rare flower of Eden-like innocence amid the weeds. "My flower,"he calls Pompilia, "My rose, I gather for the breast of God" (X, 1046-47). She has become once more the rose she was before the words of various _personae_ had metamorphosed her into something less innocent: in spite of the horrors she has known, she regains innocence after experience. (The rose image for Pompilia is matched, briefly, by a toad image for Guido (X, 550), the evil invading the sanctity of innocence.)

In another image the Pope links Caponsacchi and Pompilia in their common attribute of bravery:

> . . . it seems
> As a new attribute were born of each
> Champion of truth, the priest and wife I praise,--
> As a new safeguard sprang up in defence
> Of their new noble nature: so a thorn
> Comes to the aid of and completes the rose--
> Courage to-wit, no woman's gift nor priest's,
> I' the crisis . . . . (X, 682-689)

Not only is courage (and the will to act) given Caponsacchi, but "out of the poor trampled worm the wife, / Springs up a serpent!" (X, 699-700). Here is one more variant of the Perseus-Andromeda myth. As for Caponsacchi, the Pope, with reservations about the priest's life before

Pompilia called forth his valour, speaks of "This masquerade in sober day . . . now hypocrite's disguise, / Now fool's costume . . . " (X,1131-33). Nevertheless, the Pope pays him tribute:

> And surely not so very much apart [from Pompilia--"My rose"]
> Need I place thee, my warrior-priest,--in whom
> What if I gain the other rose, the gold,
> We grave to imitate God's miracle,
> Great monarchs with, good rose in its degree?
> (X, 1095-99)

The jewelled or ornamental rose is never so dear to Browning as the natural rose, Creation's rose, but it is still a rose, and to be valued accordingly. Both Caponsacchi and Pompilia were too pure to react to each other as Guido planned, even though passion was in the air. The Pope comprehends that the aftermath of a sudden danger may release "The perfect beauty of the body and soul," just

> As when a thundrous midnight, with black air
> That burns, rain-drops that blister, breaks a spell,
> Draws out the excessive virtue of some sheathed
> Shut unsuspected flower that hoards and hides
> Immensity of sweetness. . . . (X, 1175-79)

The image of awakening complements those noted earlier in the poem. The Pope recognizes that "Temptation" was sharp but there is no doubt in his mind that the pair withstood it. He reveals this faith in virtue in another natural metaphor:

> Here the blot is blanched
> By God's gift of a purity of soul
> That will not take pollution,ermine-like
> Armed from dishonour by its own soft snow. (X, 677-680)

The scene is set in black and white from the beginning and is absolute and unshifting as far as the Pope is concerned. He deals with the eternal verities, not with transience and change. "Go!" he says in retrospect to the Comparini, mother and father:

> Never again elude the choice of tints!
> White shall not neutralize the black nor good
> Compensate bad in man, absolve him so:
> Life's business being just the terrible choice. (X, 1235-38)

The grey are as blameable, if not more so than the black; a positive action of some kind is better than moral evasion.

How does the Pope use the Childe Roland wasteland motifs which are dominant in the rest of the poem, particularly in Book XI? Obviously the Pope, as God's emissary, will see life itself as a quest or pilgrimage and at times his imagery reflects this viewpoint. Thus,

> This life is training and a passage; pass,—
> Still, we march over some flat obstacle
> We made give way before us; solid truth
> In front of it, what motion for the world? (X, 1411-14)

His frame of reference is allegorical rather than symbolic, and becomes even more abstract in the following passage:

> Life is probation and the earth no goal
> But starting-point of man: compel him strive,
> Which means, in man, as good as reach the goal,--
> Why institute that race, his life, at all? (X, 1436-39)

Many of the objects of Roland's landscape are present in one form or another in the Pope's monologue: traps, caves, hunted and hunting animals, a tower: "But how hunts Guido? Why, the fraudful trap"(X, 725) outlawed by those who love fair play. He rescues it from its ruins, patches, refits, files "its blunted teeth anew" to "Make sure, next time, first snap shall break the bone" (X, 731-732). He chooses a violent, painful death for his victims, a jagged knife that tears the flesh too.

In reviewing those attached in any way to the crime, the Pope begins with Guido,

> . . . midmost blotch of black
> Discernible in this group of clustered crimes
> Huddling together in the cave they call
> Their palace, outraged day thus penetrates. (X, 869-872)

All within are animals of the rapacious preying sort. But the clergy of various rank and the complacent onlookers who would not interfere and prevent Guido from carrying out his plan are also among the "denizens o' the cave" who

> . . . now cluster round
> And heat the furnace sevenfold: time indeed
> A bolt from heaven should cleave roof and clear place,
> Transfix and show the world, suspiring flame,
> The main offender, scar and brand the rest
> Hurrying, each miscreant to his hole: then flood
> And purify the scene with outside day--
> Which yet, in the absolutest drench of dark,
> Ne'er wants a witness, some stray beauty-beam
> To the despair of hell. (X, 994-1003)

He calls upon a Last Judgment to burn away the darkness, to purge evil, to let light into the "absolutest drench of dark." In "Childe Roland" it is Nature who says peevishly that the land and its prisoners can only be cured and freed by "the Last Judgment's fire"--and in the "sheet of flame" at the poem's ending the Judgment seems to have come. The Pope is concerned with freeing the land from these particular prisoners. Guido's claim in Book XI, as noted above, was that the Church, in letting light into his cave or soul of darkness, had made that "place dark" which had grown "tolerable twilight" to him.

The Pope sees as beasts those who were responsible for Pompilia's suffering during her captive marriage. He has praise for Caponsacchi, saying,

> I rather chronicle the healthy rage,—
> When the first moan broke from the martyr-maid
> At that uncaging of the beasts,--made bare
> My athlete on the instant, gave such good
> Great undisguised leap over post and pale
> Right into the mid-cirque, free fighting-place. (X,1138-43)

If Caponsacchi is consistently linked by metaphor to Perseus-St. George, then the imagery of this passage lends credence to a great battle having been fought in the "fell cirque" of Roland's landscape, his psyche, between uncaged beasts (like dragons) and the knights who have gone before. As Browning has voiced in other poems, notably "The Statue and the Bust," man's virtue should be tested to give proof positive of its existence, and the Pope confirms this theologically, while lauding the courtly-priest turned soldier-saint:[57]

> Pray
> "Lead us into no such temptations, Lord!"
> Yea, but, O Thou whose servants are the bold,
> Lead such temptations by the head and hair,
> Reluctant dragons, up to who dares fight,
> That so he may do battle and have praise! (X, 1187-92)

Caponsacchi, who fought the beast, contrasts sharply with the others stronger in their faith than he who failed even to enter the fray:

> Where are the Christians in their panoply?
> The loins we girt about with truth, the breasts
> Righteousness plated round, the shield of faith,
> The helmet of salvation, and that sword
> O' the Spirit, even the word of God,--where these?
> Slunk into corners! (X, 1566-71)

The Pope's metaphors are definitely directed at spiritual armour and battle in this instance; they remind us of those knights in "Childe Roland" who had failed, been branded traitors. But "The Band" at least began the battle from which these Christians abstain.

Are the Christians of the seventeenth century (and the nineteenth) really closer to salvation than the pre-Christians for whom salvation had not come? Browning has been concerned with this question in earlier monologues on religion; in this monologue the Pope, who is Browning's re-creation of Innocent XII, considers the questions from two vantage points.

The Pope leads into the problem of faith for his time by paraphrasing the philosophy of Euripides. Browning, interested in figures of the ancient world who found the light before the Word was made flesh, had been reading Euripides' work at the time of this poem's composition.[58] Euripides asks that if he is "born to perish like the brutes, or worse, / Why not live brutishly, obey brutes' law?" (X, 1701-02). Instead, he "Adopted virtue as my rule of life, / Waived all reward, loved but for loving's sake " (X, 1711-12), thus anticipating in his ethics the ethics supposedly founded upon Christianity. He came very near to guessing what "Paul knew," in contrast to Cleon who declined to believe the barbarian Paul. Euripides' final claim, dramatized by the Pope, is important not only theologically, but because it attaches to itself the imagery of light and darkness, and the "Childe Roland" motifs:

> "Pope, dost thou dare pretend to punish me,
> "For not descrying sunshine at midnight,
> "Me who crept all-fours, found my way so far--
> "While thou rewardest teachers of the truth,
> "Who miss the plain way in the blaze of noon,--
> "Though just a word from that strong style of mine,
> "Grasped honestly in hand as guiding-staff,
> "Had pricked them a sure path across the bog,
> "That mire of cowardice and slush of lies
> "Wherein I find them wallow in wide day!" (X, 1781-90)

Guido, sunk "past level of the brute," could have been guided out of the wasteland not by lies from a malicious cripple, but by truths of a civilization predating Christ. There is irony in Euripides' words, for he, in full consciousness, never behaved as a beast; priests of the faith now wallow like beasts amidst cowardice and lies.

How is the Pope to answer Euripides? In part he can use the words uttered earlier in his monologue, similar to the words of John, or Karshish, or David, to describe that transcendent act and facet of

Christianity which distinguishes it from all other ethical creeds:

> I it is who have been appointed here
> To represent Thee, in my turn, on earth,
> Just as, if new philosophy knew aught,
> This one earth, out of all the multitude
> Of people worlds, as stars are now supposed,--
> Was chosen, and no sun-star of the swarm,
> For stage and scene of Thy transcendent act
> Beside which even the creation fades
> Into a puny exercise of power. (X, 1333-41)

The Incarnation, an event in time yet timeless, reveals God's infinite Love for all time, and embraces even Euripides.[59]

But the Pope now expresses some doubt about the strength of Christianity's light in his day (as Browning expresses doubt in his own "post-Christian world").[60] He explains why present Christians are less zealous and eager than the first Christians, who had the way of martyrdom. But he retracts this statement, and wonders if the first Christians were necessarily better. Their faith was made easier by this first burst of flame (the pure white light). Now the blaze of sun is seeming to sink,

> Till at last, who distinguishes the sun
> From a mere Druid fire on a far mount?
> More praise to him who with his subtle prism
> Shall decompose both beams and name the true. (X, 1823-26)

Those who can untwist "heaven's pure white from the yellow flare / O' the world's gross torch" include the Pope, through knowledge, Pompilia, through intuition, and Caponsacchi, through an act which redeems his shaky character. Guido has failed on all counts, even in his claims to be a Pagan, for his barbarism is that which is found when the veneer of his civilized exterior is only lightly scratched. He will be guided by neither rationalism represented by Euripides nor by faith represented by those around him who do abide by the doctrine of Love.

The Pope also anticipates the coming age of doubt which will shake the present complacency (again, a very "modern" viewpoint of Browning's age):

> What if it be the mission of that age,
> My death will usher into life, to shake
> This torpor of assurance from our creed,
> Re-introduce the doubt discarded, bring
> The formidable danger back, we drove
> Long ago to the distance and the dark?
> No wild beast now prowls round the infant camp:
> We have built wall and sleep in city safe:
> But if the earthquake try the towers that laugh
> To think they once saw lions rule outside,
> And man stand out again, pale, resolute,
> Prepared to die,-- that is, alive at last? (X, 1852-62)

To be alive is to be prepared to die, to know that there are lynx or wild cats or dragons at the gates of the tower, to be willing to break down the barriers between outside and inside. Although the Pope's words have a Christian framework they again reaffirm Browning's psychological understanding of man--as seen in "Karshish" and "Childe Roland" in particular. Man has to be in danger if he is not to face a death-in-life existence. The words also have personal significance to the Pope since he too will soon face his own "Armageddon."[61]

The tower in the above passage is a general allusion to a bastion grown over-confident in its security. There is another tower simile in the Pope's monologue which significantly parallels the Dark Tower in "Childe Roland." Guido's plan to destroy the three Comparini while leaving himself unscathed, "his pristine worth intact," is imaged in the following words:

> As when, in our Campagna, there is fired
> The nest-like work that overruns a hut;
> And, as the thatch burns here, there, everywhere,
> Even to the ivy and wild vine, that bound
> And blessed the home where men were happy once,
> There rises gradual, black amid the blaze,

Some grim and unscathed nucleus of the nest,--
Some old malicious tower, some obscene tomb
They thought a temple in their ignorance,
And clung about and thought to lean upon--
There laughs it o'er their ravage,--where are they?
(X, 620-630)

Thus Guido's cruelty burned "life about" until there was no place for the wife to flee from fire except into the arms of the first person who appears "No monster but a man--" Caponsacchi. The Dark Tower, the remnant of a dessicated landscape in "Childe Roland," was seen to represent the body, the thing itself, which Roland must face. Here, the blackened tower, grim, obscene and malicious (all adjectives applicable to Roland's projected landscape) is, in the simile, Guido's very self. But after the purging it remains untouched, a tomb representing death, not a temple, while the ambiguous tower in "Childe Roland" may be transformed inthe imminent Apocalypse to a symbol of life.

The Pope is asked a question about man's transformation, which is relevant here:

Where is the gloriously-decisive change,
Metamorphosis the immeasurable
Of human clay to divine gold, we looked
Should, in some poor sort, justify the price? (X, 1615-18)

His answer points firmly to the Incarnation, God's act of transforming, transcending Love. Thus he undercuts the metamorphosis cynically described by Guido in his second monologue, in which he would be "Deformed, transformed, reformed, informed, conformed!" (XI, 2061). To the Pope Guido is still very much "human clay," to Browning he is the lump of earth he spreads out for study, according to his letters to Julia Wedgwood. The only hope held out for Guido by the Pope is in a "suddenness of fate," a kind of Apocalyptic vision: "So may the truth be flashed out by one blow, / And Guido see, one instant, and be saved" (X, 2127-28). Thus did Roland see, in the twinkling of an eye, and was saved.

But Guido is in the dark, neither seeing nor feeling, while the Pope is able to feel faith, even when he cannot see. The Pope believes, although acknowledging that the fire burns less brightly, that "A cloud may soothe the eye made blind by blaze,--" thus admitting that weakness and imperfection may be necessary to faith. He sees man's very doubts leading to a constant "repetition of the miracle"(X, 1656), and "So, never I miss footing in the maze, / No,--I have light nor fear the dark at all" (X, 1659-60). Although he expands on this paradoxical tenet of faith in the Euripides section, it remains the heart of his message and decision. Guido, in contrast, fears the dark night of his soul greatly.

It may be seen from this brief examination of the Pope's monologue through the agency, mainly, of his natural imagery, that the relative scarceness of animal and plant images, in comparison with Guido's monologue for example, does not detract from the weight the Pope's analogies hold. If we are considering Browning's world of nature and spirit, then the Pope has combined the two quite significantly in many of his words. He, after all, is most aware of the significance of man's spirit. The fact that he works from analogies of this world to the life of the spirit is in keeping with Browning's message as a whole.

But Browning believes in the transmutability of evil, in the transformation of clay to gold. If he cannot give us unquestionable assurance that Guido has been transformed or redeemed in his last minutes on earth, he at least shows us innocence and goodness incarnate rising out of evil, in the person of Pompilia. Indeed, his poem as it resuscitates a forgotten act and a forgotten group of personae has transformed a chunk of impure metal into the golden ring. (It must be recognized, however, to continue with the metaphor, that Browning deliberately includes a large part of the unrefined base metal in his poem--the difference from the source being the fact that he has actually created anew his most "base" figure, Guido.)

Tertium Quid speaks for the pseudo-intellectual aristocrats when he utters the words used in this chapter's epigraph:

> Why, here you have the awfulest of crimes
> For nothing! Hell broke loose on a butterfly
> A dragon born of rose-dew and the moon!
> Yet here is the monster! (IV, 1600-03)

In context, the "monster" specifically is Guido, and his birth and upbringing are being referred to as singularly innocuous, most unlikely to give birth to such a crime. But Tertium Quid's words can become an image or motif for the whole poem--for its juxtaposition, violent and terrible, of crime and innocence, evil and good. The butterfly, symbolizing freedom, imagination, transience, madness and chastity, and rose-dew, can stand for man's soul as well as for the innocence of Pompilia; the dragon and the monster for the evil which exists in all men, not only in Guido. Is the "awfulest of crimes / For nothing" indeed? As has been repeatedly affirmed, Browning was drawn to filter the facts of the Old Yellow Book through his mind and heart, to resuscitate them for the British Public, almost as an obsession, to show them not only the rose's innocence but the guilt of human clay. The "monster" has to be faced, and either destroyed or transmuted.

Although ultimately evil can be conquered through God's love, it will always reappear, and the process of overcoming it without and within is a recurring, cyclical one. Out of the crime, the "dragon,"the rose may emerge with innocence redeemed after experience, proving that "So much beauty is compatible / With so much innocence!" Even the evil itself may undergo ultimate transmutation in a personal Last Judgment--we are left with Guido's last cry, to ponder its meaning. W. O. Raymond expresses Browning's position on evil as follows:

> Yet, the poet's emotional optimism is far more potent than his intellectual pessimism. Psychologically this optimism is reflected in the buoyancy and positiveness of his temperament, morally and spiritually in his conviction that, since God is a being of infinite love, the whole scheme and framework of his creation must be flawlessly good from the absolute point of view, in which the transient and illusory appearances of evil and discord are resolved and transmuted into the eternal harmonies of God's all-loving purposes.[62]

But in Book XII Fra Celestino, in his sermon which is wholly Browning's creation, recalls that with Guido's death, the "star Wormwood," evil, is not gone from this world:

"Because Pompilia's purity prevails,
"Conclude you, all truth triumphs in the end?
"So might those old inhabitants of the ark,
"Witnessing haply their dove's safe return,
"Pronounce there was no danger, all the while
"O' the deluge, to the creature's counterparts,
"Aught that beat wing i' the world, was white or soft,--
"And that the lark, the thrush, the culver too,
"Might equally have traversed air, found earth,
"And brought back olive-branch in unharmed bill.
"Methinks I hear the Patriarch's warning voice—
"'Though this one breast, by miracle, return,
"'No wave rolls by, in all the waste, but bears
"'Within it some dead dove-like thing as dear,
"'Beauty made blank and harmlessness destroyed!'"
(XII, 472-486)

A terrible beauty may be born, only to be crushed before it blossoms or takes wing into the world. There is an optimism in Browning's poetry, resting on the "buoyancy" of his natural, life-giving imagery, in large part. But this "emotional optimism" is achieved at great price, and not without a penetrating and horrified awareness of the other side of man's nature which often shows itself in its untransmuted state.

Roma King feels that by the time The Ring and the Book was created, "Browning could not remain content . . . with capturing the isolated fragments. Increasingly, he became concerned to bring his men and women together in some pattern which would suggest, if not represent, a total vision of human experience. Such a vision might reveal a metaphysical ground for values, a common pattern of conduct."[63] I have attempted to show that the poems of Browning's middle period are not "isolated fragments," that the patterns established in them are the very ones which fuse into The Ring and the Book. Browning, by the end of Book XII, has fulfilled his intention of blowing the ember of a dying tale into a flame of life (see XII, 827-834), and the tale in all its multitudinousness, to use Arnold's word, is rounded out, the ring completed. Believing that Art may save the soul, Browning ends the poem with these words:

> If this intent save mine,--
> If the rough ore be rounded to a ring,
> Render all duty which good ring should do,
> And, failing grace, succeed in guardianship,--
> Might mine but lie outside thine, Lyric Love,
> Thy rare gold ring of verse (the poet praised)
> Linking our England to his Italy! (XII, 868-874)

The last "gold ring" is a reference to Elizabeth Barrett's poetry, but time has proven that Browning's ring of monologues provide the more strongly forged link between nineteenth-century England and seventeenth-century Italy.

The central truth of The Ring and the Book cannot really be abstracted, or isolated to any single monologue. It grows out of all the monologues as they re-create the events nearly simultaneously. It resides in the multiplicity of concrete imagery and particularly in those images taken from nature which embody the passions of the characters and the themes of the poem as a whole. One of Wallace Stevens' poems makes a fitting commentary to Browning's ultimate achievement in The Ring and the Book. He writes:

> The central poem is the poem of the whole,
> The poem of the composition of the whole,
> The composition of blue sea and of green,
> Of blue light and of green, as lesser poems,
> And the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems,
> Not merely into a whole, but a poem of
> The whole, the essential compact of the parts,
> The roundness that pulls tight the final ring . . . .[64]

Although these lines suggest Browning's aesthetic ideal which was to fuse all the colours of the spectrum into the pure white light, the role of the individual fragments, when "Nature" is viewed closely and when the white light is broken down into its constituent colours, must never be underestimated. The whole may be greater than the sum of its parts, but it is upon those individual parts, be they image or character, that a poem like The Ring and the Book focusses, and upon which the ultimate unity and meaning of the poem rely.

# CONCLUSION

## "DOING THE KING'S WORK"

I'd like now, yet had haply been afraid,
To have just looked, when this man came to die,
And seen who lined the clean gay garret-sides
And stood about the neat low truckle-bed,
With the heavenly manner of relieving guard.
Here had been mark, the general-in-chief,
Thro' a whole campaign of the world's life and death,
Doing the King's work all the dim day long,
In his old coat and up to his knees in mud,
Smoked like a herring, dining on a crust,--
And, now the day was won, relieved at once!
No further show or need for that old coat,
You are sure, for one thing! (109-115)

--"How It Strikes A Contemporary"

The Browning who was lionized and dined in London, after the success of The Ring and the Book made him a much sought after if still misunderstood personage, seems far removed from his Spanish poet "dining on a crust" and wandering the streets with his old, blind dog at his heels, wearing a "scrutinizing hat" and a threadbare cloak. Yet in spirit this was the Robert Browning, poet, who saw so much more than his public wanted or cared to understand. Just as he discovered the Old Yellow Book in his browsing through a Florence book-stall, so he discovered less tangible pieces of cast-off material which fascinated him and demanded resuscitation. His eye seemed to be most acute in its ability to see strange similarities between the objects in external nature which he obviously knew intimately, and more abstract qualities in man and the universe.

It disturbed Santayana that Browning dealt with the raw materials of life in his poetry, and that he created men and women who were too "real." In his concern with the processes of life, art, and human consciousness, rather than with the perfect Whole or Ideal, Browning matches the objective poet as described in the Essay on Shelley: one "whose endeavour has been to reproduce things external . . . with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction."[1] This does not mean that the poet compromises himself, however, for what he shows his fellow men may be painful and difficult, the result of a deeply penetrating study rather than a cursory glance. The poet of this type does draw his allusions from the world of nature which speaks to him so aptly about humanity.

Browning's poet in "How It Strikes A Contemporary" begins with the materials of the immediate world, but as "recording chief-inquisitor" he then reports to the King--that is, to God--through his poetry. He acts as a "liaison" between man and God. This was the role Browning assigned to the subjective poet, who is "impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the One above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth . . . ."[2] Browning considered that the two functions should actually combine in one poet, in whose work the finite should be the channel to the infinite, the world of nature lead to that of spirit. The Ring and the Book comes very close to achieving this composite.

Browning's own quiet death occurred in Venice, out of the public eye, on the day his last work, Asolando, was published (December 12, 1889). The poems in that volume show a vitality in their imagery, and a fascination with the psychology of man, which place them with the poetry in the earlier volumes which I have examined. Their quality suggests strongly, of course, that the study of Browning's animal and plant imagery should be carried beyond *The Ring and the Book* to the large body of poetry written between 1869 and his death. His treatment of the relationship between finite and infinite, imperfection and perfection, body and soul, man and God, and nature and spirit, may shift in focus, or in mode of expression in the later poems, but the "Prologue" to *Asolando* demonstrates Browning's continual concern with these affiliations. The "Poet's age is sad" because, as the Romantic poets believed, a glow or glory has passed away from this earth,

"And now a flower is just a flower:
Man, bird, beast are but beast, bird, man--
Simply themselves, uncinct by dower
Of dyes which, when life's day began,
Round each in glory ran."

Browning answers,

Friend, did you need an optic glass,
Which were your choice? A lens to drape
In ruby, emerald, chrysopras,
Each object--or reveal its shape
Clear outlined, past escape,

The naked very thing?--so clear
That, when you had the chance to gaze,
You found its inmost self appear
Through outer seeming--truth ablaze,
Not falsehood's fancy-haze?

Though the Asolo of his youth seems changed, and the flaming Bush which burned unconsumed is now bare, the clarity of vision with which Browning sees the "naked" things in Nature gives him freedom to *hear* the truth:

. . . the purged ear apprehends
Earth's import, not the eye late dazed:
The Voice said "Call my works thy friends!
At Nature dost thou shrink amazed?
God is it who transcends."

# FOOTNOTES

## Introduction

[1] All quotations from Browning's poetry are taken from *The Works of Robert Browning*, ed. F. G. Kenyon, 10 vols., the Centenary Edition. However, when I speak of *Dramatic Lyrics*, *Men and Women*, and so on, I am referring to the poems in their original groupings as first published, and not as rearranged by Browning in subsequent editions (as followed by Kenyon). In longer poems, lineation, or book number and lineation will be given in parentheses after the quotation, thus:(32-37), or(V, 32-37) in the case of *Sordello* and *The Ring and the Book*.

[2] Park Honan in *Browning's Characters* deals briefly with animal imagery in *The Ring and the Book*, as do Altick and Loucks in *Browning's Roman Murder Story*. Other than in articles written in a general vein during the Browning Society era, and articles of more recent vintage on individual poems, very little of the potential in Browning's natural imagery has been tapped.

[3] Smith, *Browning's Star-Imagery*, 3.

[4] Imagery, "if used, must be part of a larger whole and cannot in and of itself constitute a whole. Far from being itself a unifying form, it must be unified along with all the other elements of a poem (such as rhyme and meter, stylistic, rhetorical, and grammatical schemes, patterns of sequence and order, the devices of points of view, the methods of selection and omission, aspects of thought and character and action, and so on)" (*Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 369).

[5] Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, 24. Cleanth Brooks writes of the Victorian age: "Poetry is left impaled on one of the two horns of the dilemma: poetry with a message, the 'philosophy' of Tennyson and Browning--the attempt to substitute poetry for religion, or, on the other hand, pure poetry, art for art's sake" (*Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, 232). He agrees, then, with Leavis.

[6] Santayana, "The Poetry of Barbarism," 189.

[7] Arnold, *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, 519.

[8] Santayana, "The Poetry of Barbarism," 197.

[9] Ibid., 191.

[10] Quoted in Johnson, "Robert Browning's Pluralistic Universe: A Reading of *The Ring and the Book*," 20.

[11] Elliott, "The Whitmanism of Browning," 84, paraphrasing a line from "Rabbi Ben Ezra."

[12] Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry, 24.

[13] Shaw, "Character and Philosophy in 'Fra Lippo Lippi,'" 127.

[14] Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," 22: "The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner. The two superiorities are closely related, and are in steadfast proportion one to the other." But see also the earlier essay, "Preface to First Edition of Poems (1853)," 5, 7-8,9ff.

Critics who do establish this equilibrium include, over the years, C. H. Herford (Robert Browning), Roma A. King (The Focusing Artifice), W. O. Raymond (The Infinite Moment), Park Honan (Browning's Characters), and W. David Shaw (The Dialectical Temper). Others who recall Browning to his rightful position will be referred to as their contributions seem significant in the discussion.

[15] Burke, "Freud--And the Analysis of Poetry," 224.

[16] Ibid., 228.

[17] Ibid., 238

[18] Symons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, 8.

[19] Pater, The Renaissance, 226-227, from which I have quoted rather than Symons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, 8-9, where he quotes Pater but with minor variations.

[20] The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, I, 7 (Jan.13,1845): "I. . .give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light." This is one instance of many.

## Chapter I

[1] Pound, ABC of Reading, 191, referring to Sordello, I, 372ff., the beautiful re-creation of Mantua and Goito.

[2] Pratt, The Imagist Poem, 24. See ibid., 22 for other Imagist "rules."

[3] Pound, "Vorticism," 464. See also Pound, "Vortex," 154, and "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," 200.

[4] See above, page 7, and Pound, "Vortex," 153.

[5] Lewis, C. Day, The Poetic Image, 23, quoting Middleton Murry.

[6] Pound, "Vorticism," 462. See Wallace Stevens' poem, "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself," Poems, 166; and Pound, "A Retrospect," Literary Essays, 3.

[7] Hough, Image and Experience, 12.

[8] Pound, "A Retrospect," Literary Essays, 5. Also in "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," 201.

[9] Ibid., 9. See Hough, Image and Experience, 133ff. for a discussion of what Pound meant by saying that the natural object was the adequate symbol.

[10] Browning's Essay on Shelley, 63. It must be recognized that Browning's two categories of objective and subjective are not separate from, nor exclusive of, one another. See the article by Philip Drew, "Browning's Essay On Shelley," and the reply by Thomas J. Collins, "Browning's Essay on Shelley: In Context," for a clearer understanding of Browning's poetic theory here.

[11] See Stange, "Browning and Modern Poetry," included in Tracy, ed., Browning's Mind and Art. But for the more negative view see Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition, and especially Introduction, n. 5, above.

A Pound critic, William Van O'Connor, says that Browning was one of "Pound's culture heroes" and that "Pound admired in Browning many of the virtues he saw in Crabbe--realism, precision, terseness, the charged line, objectivity. And perhaps Pound's affection for Italy is involved with Browning's love for that country" (Ezra Pound, 30). See also De Nagy, "Pound and Browning," for a fuller discussion of Browning's interaction, poetically, with the early Pound.

[12] Hough, Image and Experience, 14.

[13] In "The Iron Strings in the Victorian Lyre: Browning's Lyric Versification," Park Honan discusses Browning's concept of the lyric, and his prosody which "begins where Donne's leaves off." For Browning, subject determines his style, "rather than do the traditional and implicit requirements of the lyric genre." His aim is to bring the rough and smooth of life into the lyric by "representing 'life' as closely and realistically as technique will permit. His lyrics imitate life's sounds, and in so doing they prepare the way for bolder, later experiments in free verse and open rhythms. . . " (Tracy, ed. Browning's Mind and Art, 86, 99).

[14] Keats, Poetical Works, 367.

[15] "They said, 'You have a blue guitar, / You do not play things as they are" (Wallace Stevens, Poems, 72).

[16] Browning's Essay on Shelley, 67.

[17] Ruskin queried this stanza: "'Bee to her groom' I don't understand. I thought there was only one Queen-bee and she never was out o' nights--nor came home drunk or disorderly" (DeLaura, ed., "Ruskin and the Brownings: Twenty-Five Unpublished Letters," 325 [Dec. 2, 1855]).

[18] Ruskin, "Elements of Drawing," Works of John Ruskin, XI, 158. Another dictum of painting given by Ruskin applies to the concept of imagery we have been discussing: "Good coloring does not necessarily convey the image of anything but itself" ("Stones of Venice," Works of John Ruskin, VI, 201). However, Ruskin introduces this idea in order to qualify it, by observing that the combination of colour and form is superior to the abstract colour alone. The blue is attached to the blue-bell, in other words.

[19] Herford, Robert Browning, 250.

[20] DeLaura, ed., "Ruskin and the Brownings: Twenty-Five Unpublished Letters," 326 (Dec. 2, 1855). Maisie Ward mentions this criticism by Ruskin and Chesterton in Robert Browning and His World, I, 253-254.

[21] An image may not be a picture, may not be visual or even sensory at all. For some artists the image is the words of a thought, devoid of any concrete recall of sense experiences. Henry James, for example, in his "Preface" to The Ambassadors, writes that the passage beginning, "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. . ." is the central image of that novel. "Nothing can exceed the closeness with which the whole fits again into its germ. That had been given me bodily, as usual, by the spoken word, for I was to take the image over exactly as I happened to have met it" (The Ambassadors, I, v-vi). Both Browning and James see the word itself as "body."

[22] Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, II, 1079-80 (Sept. 16, 1846). According to editor Kintner (ibid., 1080, n. 2) the review Browning mentions was in The Church of England Quarterly, XIII (April 1843), 447.

[23] See page 14, and n. 10, above.

[24] Haber and Haber, "Eidetic Imagery: I. Frequency." 131.

[25] Paivio, "Mental Imagery in Associative Learning and Memory," 243.

[26] Bonnell, "Touch Imagery in the Poetry of Robert Browning," 579.

[27] Ibid., 584. The Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics lists the mental images as including visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile (texture), organic (awareness of heart, pulse, digestion), and kinesthetic. "Much of Browning's [imagery], for example, is tactile, and those who habitually visualize are unjust in laying the charge of obscurity at his door. . . " (364).

[28] McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy, 65.

[29] McLuhan and Parker, Through the Vanishing Point, 55.

[30] Ibid., 264.

[31] Herford, Robert Browning, 244.

[32] Ibid., 255-256.

[33] Browning really wrote Sordello in four stages and these were never entirely reconciled. See DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 71-87, and the new notes to Sordello, in The Complete Works of Robert Browning, ed. Roma A. King, II, 361-422.

[34] Pound, ABC of Reading, 191. See also Canto II (The Cantos of Ezra Pound, 6) and the original Canto I, published in Poetry, X (June, 1917), 113-121, and later dropped, for allusions to Browning and his Sordello. Also see Hugh Kenner, The Pound Era, 356-360, for discussion of the original Canto I and Browning.

[35] King, The Focusing Artifice, xix.

[36] Collins, "The Poetry of Robert Browning: Suggestions for Reappraisal," np.

[37] Sullivan, Browning's Voices, 195.

[38] Ibid., 195.

[39] See Ibid., 192-193, and Williams, Robert Browning, 36, for further analysis.

[40] Duffin, Amphibian, 231: "Browning told Furnivall that this last description was the one which applied to Sordello, and that the whole of the rest of the poem was an example of its result. Since Sordello's life ended in failure it would seem that Browning intended to show this as a false aim. But it only became so when Sordello abandoned poetry for political leadership. 'Eternity's concern' may be alien to the soldier, the lawyer or the stockbroker, but it is surely the very business of the poet."

[41] Smith, Browning's Star-Imagery, 62.

[42] Collingwood, The Life of John Ruskin, 164 (Dec. 10, 1855).

[43] Smith, Browning's Star-Imagery, 65.

[44] Browning's Essay on Shelley, 67.

[45] Miller, The Disappearance of God, 84.

[46] Sullivan, Browning's Voices, 190.

[47] DeLaura, ed., "Ruskin and the Brownings: Twenty-Five Unpublished Letters," 326-327 (Dec. 2, 1855).

[48] Collingwood, The Life of John Ruskin, 164 (Dec. 10, 1855).

[49] See page 20, above.

[50] "Introduction," Poems and Plays of Robert Browning, ed. Bryson, I,vi.

[51] For T. E. Hulme, who formulated much of the Imagist aesthetic, poetic language is metaphorical, not logical. A series of images which would take effect instantaneously was to replace the sequential narrative of older poetry. Hulme believed that "Thought is prior to language and consists in the simultaneous presentation to the mind of two different images" ("Notes on Language and Style," 84).

[52] Langbaum, "Browning and the Question of Myth," 579.

[53] Ibid., 579. See also Columbus and Kemper, "Sordello and the Speaker," 252.

[54] Swinburne, "George Chapman," Complete Works, XII, 151, (and see 152). W. David Shaw writes: "Because Sordello neglects the responsibilities of his craft, his words pile themselves up blindly, often defeating the impact of each other. The account of his emotional experience betrays no structure whatever, and most of his rhetoric defines only a vague feeling of excitement and disorder" (Dialectical Temper, 36).

[55] And many modern writers ask this, too, of the reader. James, when he says of The Turn of the Screw, "all my values are positive blanks," is asking the reader to fill them in ("Preface," The Aspern Papers . . ., xxv). Point of view narrative in general is an outgrowth of Browning's method. Finnegans Wake, for example, is a tremendous exercise in exploiting the potentialities and circumventing the difficulties of language as Joyce, and Browning, see them.

[56] Letter of Dedication to John Milsand, June 9, 1863, Poetical Works of Robert Browning (London, 1896), I, 115.

[57] Roma King explains that beyond the need of all men to become artists, "the special artist--the poet, the painter, the musician--had another task. If he were to transcend the private, he had to create not only his own 'soul' but an artifice capable of bringing together into a coherent vision which transforms the part into the whole and the merely private into the universal" (The Focusing Artifice, xviii).

[58] Whitla, The Central Truth, 14.

[59] Ibid., 16. Mary Sullivan explains the three categories as follows: "The lowest form of poetry, then, seems to be that in which the poet narrates, or merely EFFUSES his private vision, the next higher, that in which the poet INTERPRETS his vision for the reader, and the highest of all, that in which the poet dramatically RENDERS his vision so that his reader can experience it with him" (Browning's Voices, 195).

[60] Browning's Essay On Shelley, 66-68.

[61] Shaw, The Dialectical Temper, 37.

[62] Browning's Essay On Shelley, 68.

[63] DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 87.

[64] Stevenson, "The Key Poem of the Victorian Age," 289.

[65] Knight, The Starlit Dome, 318. "Painting, sculpture and architecture exist in space; music and poetry in time. But each kind always aspires towards the other. The spatial arts either suggest narrative, or at least are alive with a significance on the brink of motion; and the temporal arts achieve 'form,' or 'structure'" (ibid., 318).

[66] Ruskin, "Stones of Venice," Works of John Ruskin, VI, 188.

[67] Ibid., 176.

[68] Ibid., 177-178.

[69] Ibid., 189.

[70] Ibid., 190.

[71] William Whitla analyzes the flower imagery as follows: "The popular street song, based on the fruit and flower symbol for love and sensual pleasure, recurs throughout the poem, but always in different ways and at significant points in the thought. It underlines or contrasts with what has gone before and what comes after the song, thus fulfilling its symbolic role of love in the critical moment acting to crystallize an epiphany. The flower imagery is also often connected with death imagery (the Incarnation, Good Friday, and the Resurrection, again the pattern of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day) . . . " (The Central Truth, 62-63). "The flower symbolism used in the painting of the Madonna refers to perfection, as the culmination of the monologue issues in the synthesis of two areas of symbol and poles of contrast" (ibid., 63). The painting represents a union of body and soul symbols, "this-worldly" and "other-worldly." See ibid., 62, n. 9 for Whitla's division of all symbols in this poem into the two kinds.

[72] Sonstroem, "Animal and Vegetable in the Spanish Cloister," 72.

[73] Ibid., 72.

[74] Shaw, "Character and Philosophy in 'Fra Lippo Lippi,'" 130-131. Also, "Fra Lippo is probably the most genuinely religious sensualist in English literature. His vision of God creating Eve rises instinctively, and releases that incorruptible and childlike impulse to glorify God and His creation--that passion for spontaneous worship . . . so brilliantly dramatized in earlier sections of the poem" (ibid., 129).

[75] Baker, ed., Pippa Passes and Shorter Poems, 261, note.

[76] David Shaw sees "the cup runs over" as a "pungent inversion of Old Testament Language" ("Character and Philosophy in 'Fra Lippo Lippi,'" 129). Lippi uses parables and sermons for his own ends.

[77] Ibid., 128.

[78] Langbaum, "Browning and the Question of Myth," 581. See section II of "Parleying with Francis Furini," where there is a startling similarity of theme and image.

[79] Whitla, The Central Truth, 60.

[80] Bieman, "An Eros Manqué: Browning's 'Andrea del Sarto,'" 664. See the complete article for the details of Miss Bieman's theory.

## Chapter II

[1] Willey, Nineteenth Century Studies, 34.

[2] Ibid., 34-35, quoting Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, II, 12.

[3] Ibid., 34.

[4] Dramatic Lyrics appeared as "Bells and Pomegranates. No. III--Dramatic Lyrics" in 1842; Dramatic Romances and Lyrics first appeared as "Bells and Pomegranates. No. VII. Dramatic Romances and Lyrics" in 1845. I have kept these original groupings in mind; however, see Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1849) combining the 1842 and 1845 pamphlets for the more final titles of the poems. See DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 150-151.

[5] King, The Focusing Artifice, xix.

[6] Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, I, 7, (Jan. 13, 1845).

[7] Langbaum, "Browning and the Question of Myth," 581.

[8] Letters of Robert Browning, ed. Hood, 1 (July 24, 1838).

[9] See page 12, above, and Chapter I, n.22.

[10] Roma King writes that Browning indicates in "'Transcendentalism'" that "song, not instruction, is the end of art. By song he means more than lyrical expression or words capable of musical annotation. He refers to the mode of expression that transcends rational statement and, by uniting intellect with emotion and sense, communicates meaning beyond that of ordinary language. The poet is a magician, not a philosopher; a maker, not a sayer. He illuminates rather than instructs. His method is dramatic and symbolic" (Focusing Artifice, 90-91).

[11] Altick, "Browning's 'Transcendentalism,'" 24-28.

[12] "Boehme, like Freud, understands death not as a mere nothing but as a positive force either in dialectical conflict with life (in fallen man), or dialectically unified with life (in God's perfection)" (Brown, *Life Against Death*, 310).

[13] *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, I, 356-357 (Jan. 4, 1846).

[14] Ibid., I, 361, 362 (Jan. 5, 1846). Barbara Melchiori has given a total Freudian reading of these two letters to try to show, among other things, that Browning feared "castration" in his marriage to an invalid. See *Browning's Poetry of Reticence*, 152-154.

[15] Shaw, *The Dialectical Temper*, 90.

[16] Ibid., 91.

[17] Miller, "The Univocal Chiming," *Hopkins*, ed. Hartman, 97.

[18] Stevenson, "The Key Poem of the Victorian Age," 286.

[19] *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, I, 27, (Feb. 26, 1845).

[20] Swinburne, "George Chapman," *Complete Works*, XII, 145-46.

[21] This poem becomes an ironic metaphor for the poetic process further evolved in *The Ring and the Book*. It has been suggested that Browning is mocking his critics, the "British Public" who do not understand him. If we consider *The Ring and the Book*, does the pure gold truth, remain, after most of the intricacies of the alloy have been investigated and refined out? Is "Master Hugues" another metaphor for the poetic process? Or is the "truth" not more likely to be found in the intricacies themselves?

[22] In Eliot's "Gerontion" the narrator is in his old age, but he has not "seen" as has Lazarus. He asks, after saying that he has lost all his senses, "What will the spider do, / Suspend its operations, will the weevil / delay?" (*Selected Poems*, 33).

[23] Frye, *T. S. Eliot*, 86, 88.

[24] Baker, ed., *Pippa Passes and Shorter Poems*, 441, note.

[25] See Barbara Melchiori's full discussion of "The Heretic's Tragedy" in *Browning's Poetry of Reticence*, 76-80.

[26] Ibid., 121. Melchiori also sees the "bee-honey-gold association" as a "cluster" which "was probably the most potent in influencing [Browning], as it represented the pleasure of the sexual act itself" (ibid., 51). For the dating of "Women and Roses," see ibid., 120 and 136, n. 93.

[27] Shaw, The Dialectical Temper, 111-112.

[28] Hearn, "Studies in Browning," 201.

[29] Williams, Robert Browning, 87.

[30] Ibid., 87.

[31] Melchiori, Browning's Poetry of Reticence, 217.

[32] Bonnell, "Touch Imagery in the Poetry of Robert Browning," 576.

[33] One should examine "Christabel" and "The Eve of St. Agnes" to compare and contrast the imagery of sexual initiation with Browning's use of it.

[34] See, for example, the gold of the woman's hair in "A Toccata of Galuppi's," the electrified hair in "Mesmerism," Porphyria's yellow hair, the hair of Lucrezia in "Andrea del Sarto," the comparison of the woman's black hair in "The Statue and the Bust" with a "coal-black tree" and a "war-steed's encolure," and, finally, the women for whom the monk lusts in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister":

> . . . While brown Dolores
>   Squats outside the Convent bank,
> With Sanchicha, telling stories,
>   Steeping tresses in the tank,
> Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs,
>   --Can't I see his dead eye glow
> Bright, as 'twere a Barbary corsair's?
>   (That is, if he'd let it show!)

Barbara Melchiori treats literary and symbolic allusions to gold, including gold hair, in two chapters of Browning's Poetry of Reticence. Hair's gold is juxtaposed with money's gold in such poems as "Gold Hair: A Story of Pornic" and "Love Among the Ruins."

[35] Cf. Melchiori, Browning's Poetry of Reticence, Appendix E. There are frequent references to "The Flight of the Duchess" in the early letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett.

[36] A noiseless patient spider,
I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.
And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Carelessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres
    to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be formed, till the ductile
    anchor hold,

> Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.
> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 347-348.

[37] See Colville, *Victorian Poetry and the Romantic Religion*, 155-157, for an interesting appraisal of the evolutionary scope of this poem.

[38] Whitla, *The Central Truth*, 94.

[39] Ibid., 95.

[40] Witness Browning's first publications, the "Bells and Pomegranates" series, as explained in *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, I, 105 (June 25, 1845). And Miss Barrett in one of her poems referred to Browning's pomegranate heart; in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" (1844) she likens his poetry to "some 'Pomegranate' which, if cut deep down the middle, / Shows a heart within blood-tinctured of a veined humanity." See references in *Sordello*, III, 356; "The Englishman in Italy," *The Ring and the Book*, I, 1396; and "Balaustian's Adventure" ("Wild-pomegranate-flower"). Also see Fairchild, "Browning's Pomegranate Heart."

[41] The elemental animals, sea-jellies, recur in images spoken by those diverse *personae*, John of "A Death in the Desert" and Caliban of "Caliban Upon Setebos."

[42] In "Too Late" from *Dramatis Personae* there is a sexual image of wine which provides a metaphysical shudder as the man laments his failure to act, to seize the love which was within his grasp: "There you stand, / Warm too, and white too: would this wine / Had washed all over that body of yours, / Ere I drank it, and you down with it, thus!" The wine is linked with blood, communion, love, religion, and death. Herbert Read writes of these lines, "The sentiment is not so crisp as in Donne, but here and generally in Browning's love poetry, the passion is real" (*Phases of English Poetry*, 80). Like Donne, Browning did not hesitate to use sexual imagery in religious poems, or religious descriptions for the experience of human love.

[43] Ruskin wrote a poem in 1844, "A Walk in Chamouni," which presents interesting parallels to and contrasts with "By the Fire-side."

[44] Whitla, *The Central Truth*, 95.

[45] This metaphor is a recurring one; see, for example, "Saul," and "The Statue and the Bust," where the metaphor is ironic and *no* action is taken by body or soul.

[46] Hartman, "Introduction," *Hopkins*, 13.

[47] Two major religious monologues are being omitted here: "Bishop Blougram's Apology" shows a Bishop who knows very well how to argue from the things of this world, but his examples are rarely from organic

nature; John in "A Death in the Desert" uses certain important natural analogies, but to analyze that poem would take us further into the problems of Higher Criticism than is appropriate for this study.

[48] The source of the poem is I Samuel, xvi, 14-23. Browning also draws upon Christopher Smart's preface to his "Ode to Music on Saint Cecilia's Day," and upon "Song to David." Roma King also sees the influence of Elizabeth Barrett's poetry upon Browning in this poem (The Bow and the Lyre, 102).

[49] Roma King argues that the imagery bears out his criticism that "Saul" is not consistently developed either dramatically or lyrically. Nor is such a carefully assimilated persona created as in the other monologues—David's imagery is Browning's, so King feels. See The Bow and the Lyre, 122-123.

[50] Roma King makes the following evaluation of Browning as a mystic poet: "'Saul' illustrates . . . that, although Browning was fascinated by the idea of the 'infinite moment' and the 'one experience' he was rarely able to communicate it effectively . . . . If 'Saul' were influenced by Smart, as DeVane thinks, it is not surprising that Browning should want to communicate David's one, ultimate, and all revealing moment. . . . But in spite of his elaborate and partly effective technique, he failed to present the experience itself symbolically and perceptually. Like Donne, he talks poetically about mystical and religious experience, but is unable to communicate a sense of the experience itself. Although Browning fails to write mystical poetry, he triumphs on another level. Projecting the whole of himself into his work--both his impulse toward multiplicity and his desire for singleness of purpose and devotion--he creates a poetry out of conflict . . ." (ibid., 122).

Leaving aside "Saul" for the moment, I would argue with King that the very inexpressibility of the "infinite moment" is what Browning seeks to communicate through his various personae. When he does succeed in expressing the intangible, it is through the use of concrete symbols and perceptions, which he recognizes as the groundwork for the infinite.

[51] See the "Epilogue" to Dramatis Personae for a similar emphasis on the "Face" of God.

[52] Thomas Collins comes to terms with the discrepancies between the sections of the poem. He feels that in the first nine stanzas of "Saul" David is fulfilling the function of the objective poet, while in the last half David rises above the natural order, and "achieves the insight of the subjective poet in the redemptive vision of the Incarnation" ("Browning's Essay on Shelley: In Context," 122). For it is necessary that the poet "encompass both 'raw material' and 'spiritual comprehension' in his work" (ibid., 122). See also ibid., 123, for Collins' clear analysis of Incarnation as subject-image.

[53] Honan, Browning's Characters, 149. See also pages 173-174 for other animal imagery in "An Epistle . . . of Karshish."

[54] Honan indirectly gives strength to my argument when he points out the fire and light images which recur throughout "A Death in the Desert" in reference to Christ and the truth he presents. For one of the allusions is to Christ's eyes as "flame" (ibid., 199).

Also, one should allude to the seeming dichotomy between the tiger in Eliot's "Gerontion," in Frye's view a symbol of Antichrist, or wrath, the eternal spiritual opposition of the world of Christ; and the leopards in "Ash Wednesday," which, "however terrifying,are really agents of redemption" (T.S.Eliot, 56,76).

[55] "Lazarus, having experienced eternal life, is not subject to doubt and hence he can not think or talk on the plane of earthly humanity. Browning considers doubt a spiritual advantage, and any mystical contact of a man with Absolute Reality a disaster" (Baker, ed. Pippa Passes and Shorter Poems, 289, note).

[56] DeVane writes: "The senses and the intellect of man admit the strength and intelligence of God, and the problem as it always seemed to Browning, was to prove that God's love was the equal of His other attributes" (A Browning Handbook, 203). For Browning the Incarnation was the physical or visible manifestation of such love. In Easter-Day it is love which is the only "worthy evidence for faith," (ibid., 203) the Divine Love which God showed in sending His Son to live and die among men. Thus it is man in his direct relation to Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection which Browning seeks to portray in the religious monologues. Browning's religion was not an interior, mystical experience, but a present reality. Although we can never have the historical experience of Incarnation again, the fact of it is manifest in those who have transmitted its message.

[57] "[Browning] said, 'The evidence of divine power is everywhere about us; not so the evidence of divine love. That love could only reveal itself to the human heart by some supreme act of human tenderness and devotion; the fact, or fancy, of Christ's cross and passion could alone supply such a revelation'(quoted by Mrs. Orr, Contemporary Review, December, 1891)" (Baker,ed., Pippa Passes and Shorter Poems, 292, note).

[58] Crawford, "Browning's 'Cleon,'" 489.

[59] Compare these two stanzas from "The Last Ride Together":

What does it all mean, poet? Well,
Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell
What we felt only; you expressed
You hold things beautiful the best,
   And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.

'T is something nay 't is much: but then,
Have you yourself what's best for men?
Are you--poor, sick, old ere your time--
Nearer one whit your own sublime
Than we who never have turned a rhyme?
   Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride. (67-77)

[60] Although more sophisticated, Cleon in his physical fear of death is somewhat akin to the Bishop of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church." Also compare theme and imagery in this section with Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

[61] Tracy, "Caliban Upon Setebos," 487.

[62] Herford, *Robert Browning*, 166.

[63] Tracy, "Caliban Upon Setebos," 487. See also DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*, 265.

[64] Controversy waxes strong over the existence and nature of the satire of the poem. C. R. Tracy, summarizing the various positions taken from the Browning Society on, sees the satire working on at least two levels, but not necessarily dominating the poem's purpose. Essentially, Tracy sympathizes with Caliban's two-fold conception of a god (Setebos, and later Quiet) as being analogous to Browning's conception of the paradoxical dual nature of the Christian God. See "Caliban Upon Setebos," 487-499.

The critics Michael Timko and Lawrence Perrine first reply to John Howard's contention that the poem is not a satire, but a presentation of a primitive subhuman, depraved, with a beast's understanding of a higher power. (See Howard, "Caliban's Mind,"249-257). Caliban is not a subhuman in Timko's eyes, and the poem, with its sub-title "Natural Theology in the Island," should be read as a satire on those members of orthodoxy who appear to discount rationalistic concepts of the universe, yet who use those very empirical, rational arguments (such as the argument of design) to support their case. William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) and Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* (1736) are the two works which, more than Darwinism, motivated Browning's attack, according to Timko. (See "Browning Upon Butler; or, Natural Theology in the English Isle,"141-150.)

Perrine feels that "What is satirized is not Caliban's ideas *as held by him* but as held by Calvinists and puritans and evangelicals clear into the nineteenth century--and beyond" ("Browning's 'Caliban Upon Setebos':A Reply," 125). All the influences and frames of reference (barring Howard's) presented by critics may be found in the poem, as well as others.

[65] For a discussion of *Essays and Reviews* see Bowen, *The Idea of the Victorian Church: A Study of the Church of England 1833-1889*, 160-172; Cornish, *The English Church in the Nineteenth Century, Part II*; and Raymond, "Browning and Higher Criticism," in *The Infinite Moment*.

[66] The crucial work, *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined*, appeared in 1862.

[67] Raymond, *The Infinite Moment*, 32. Another bone of contention had been the translation into English of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* and Renan's *La Vie de Jésus*; with both of these works Browning acquainted himself early on, and his reactions to them and to the German

rationalist school are of course reflected in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* and a number of poems in *Dramatis Personae*.

[68] Bowen, *The Idea of the Victorian Church*, 167, quoting Jowett.

[69] Timko, "Browning Upon Butler," 142.

[70] See Howard, "Caliban's Mind," as summarized in n. 64, above.

[71] Herford, *Robert Browning*, 164.

[72] Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V, i, 275-276. See also I, ii, 283-284, 372-374; II, ii, 35.

[73] Melchiori, *Browning's Poetry of Reticence*, 148-149. See her analysis of the sexual symbolism of this and other passages in the poem (149 ff). She devotes a chapter to "Caliban" and in it, as well as tracing the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution, she also explores Browning's penetration into the psychological consequences of the whole field of anthropology.

[74] Howard, "Caliban's Mind," 255.

[75] Baker, ed., *Pippa Passes and Shorter Poems*, 512, note.

[76] "Caliban, like David in 'Saul,' creates his god in his own image; but where David, a man of up-welling affection, has faith that God is Love, Caliban assumes a cruel, savage, arbitrary god. Thus Browning satirizes one of the anthropomorphic elements in religion, and perhaps implies that 'natural theology'--the attempt to define the nature of God by purely rationalistic speculation from the evidence of Nature--is always likely to fall into the same pit" (ibid., 508, note).

The Butler mentioned in n. 64 was Joseph Butler, author of *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed*. But there is a more famous Butler, Samuel, who threw himself into the fray of Darwinism and the outcome of "Natural Theology," in his *Evolution, Old and New*. Rather than allowing, like Paley, an unexplainable Designer who was Omnipotent yet who had to be explained anthropomorphically for man to understand, Butler said that every organism was its own designer. Browning might have agreed in spirit with Butler's basic charge that the Darwinians use "natural selection" to replace the will of God with luck and another unintelligible power outside ourselves, an old miracle with a new one. But Browning saw his own miracle and evidence of God in the Incarnation. Here is where Butler and Browning sharply diverge from one another. Although Browning does affirm evidence of God in each facet of the spectrum, in each organism, he does not rely totally on the argument of design to prove God's existence, but rather believes that Incarnation does transcend the temporal and momentary. Nevertheless, Browning would likely have felt that something must explain what occurs within the organism when it adapts, otherwise, as Butler says, "*Origin of Species* would. . . prove to be no less a piece of intellectual sleight-of-hand than Paley's *Natural Theology*" (*Evolution, Old and New*, 305. See also ibid., 1, 24, 25, and 27).

[77] Robert Langbaum supplies an explanation for Browning's disapproval of the Darwinians for this same reason. They do ~~not~~ realize, he says, "that their theory is itself, by its hierarchical arrangement of nature, an anthropomorphizing symbol system based on intuition of a perfection from which all nature can be scaled downward. The Darwinians, who take an abstract view of nature, looking downward from the top, see only what is lacking. An artist like Furini, ["Parleying with Francis Furini"] instead, who takes his stand within nature, can through loving penetration of a particular thing uncover 'Marvel at hiding under marvel, pluck / Veil after veil from Nature' . . . and thus see the living thing as pointing upward, as symbolizing the whole perfect scheme" ("Browning and the Question of Myth," 581). For "Furini" substitute "Browning" and one has an admirable expression of *his* understanding of "Nature" and human nature.

[78] John in "A Death in the Desert" provides the orthodox answer to the predicament in two passages especially central to our concerns. The victory of man-as-God, he says, only leads to defeat and to death-in-life. Rather, man should see his place clearly as "mere man" who may neither "know God nor mistake himself," except as a thing neither God nor beast:

> Lower than God who knows all and can all,
> Higher than beasts which know and can so far
> As each beast's limit, perfect to an end,
> Nor conscious that they know, nor craving more;
> While man knows partly but conceives beside,
> Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,
> And in this striving, this converting air
> Into a solid he may grasp and use,
> Finds progress, man's distinctive mark alone,
> Not God's and not the beasts': God is, they are,
> Man partly is and wholly hopes to be. (578-587)

Although out of context this passage may read like a statement of faith in nineteenth-century materialism, scientific and economic, Browning had another intention. It is an answer to Cleon's jaded denial of the benefits of man attaining consciousness and becoming the better beast. Man is ever becoming; to receive absolute knowledge would be to take away the soul's progress and the body's motion and flexibility.

And a Caliban, too, could be answered as he struggles with his embryonic self-awareness. For it is God's quality of Love, revealed once and for all in the "Christ in God" which makes man's position tenable:

> For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
> And hope and fear, believe the aged friend,--
> Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
> How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;
> And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
> Such prize despite the envy of the world,
> And, having gained truth, keep truth: that is all. (244-250)

Chapter III

[1] McLuhan and Parker, Through the Vanishing Point, 137 (referring to Fuseli's painting, "Nightmare").

[2] Woodard writes: "When present-day students of Browning wish to venture a comment on '"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,"' they are generally handicapped by a self-conscious feeling that there is not much more to be said. Because of the quantity of scholarly labor expended on the poem, articles written as long as fifteen or twenty years ago were already being prefaced with apologies indicative of the author's temerity in approaching the subject in print. One would need the courage of Childe Roland himself to venture a further opinion. Surely, however, to borrow one of Browning's own titles, it is permissible to venture one word more" ("The Road to the Dark Tower: An Interpretation of Browning's 'Childe Roland,'" 93). Over a decade later, one may say the same thing, while stressing that the kind of reading to be given "Childe Roland" in this study has never fully been carried out in any work thus far, although individual steps may have been made in the general direction.

[3] Whiting, The Brownings, 261.

[4] Roppen and Sommer in Strangers and Pilgrims, 305, write: "In the interaction between conscious and habitual medium--the moral allegory--and the subconscious experience--the myth element--Childe Roland is born."

[5] Shakespeare, King Lear, III, iv, 187-189.

[6] Woodard, "The Road to the Dark Tower: An Interpretation of Browning's 'Childe Roland,'" 99.

[7] King Lear, III, iv, 51-54.

[8] Ibid., III, iv, 134-139.

[9] Ibid., III, iv, 93-97.

[10] DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 231.

[11] Langbaum, Poetry of Experience, 192.

[12] Roppen and Sommer, Strangers and Pilgrims, 304-305.

[13] Melchiori, Browning's Poetry of Reticence, 121-122.

[14] Melchiori writes (ibid., 130): "The struggle of Childe Roland all the time is against despair, and Christian and Hopeful were taken prisoners by Giant Despair. The giant tries to break down Christian's resistance by showing him the bones of those who had tried before him to reach the celestial city, and had fallen victims, while Childe

Roland dwells on the thought of the 'lost adventurers.' Much of Christian's journey is in the dark, day breaks only when he is in view of the celestial city. In the same way Childe Roland's journey takes place in a prolonged supernatural twilight, until the last moment when he reaches the end of his journey. Christian crosses a terrible river, the river of death, and faces the last onslaught of Despair. Then, at a blast of trumpets, he sees the golden celestial city of Revelation.

The last part of Roland's journey can be seen as a photographic negative of Christian's. What Roland finds at the end, in the last flash of sinister light, is all the remains of the celestial city, the 'round squat turret, blind as a fool's heart.' The fool's heart is Browning's own."

But the Times Literary Supplement, in its critical review of Melchiori's book, says of this particular passage: "Mrs. Melchiori's view that Childe Roland expresses Browning's real despair at his lack of recognition, for instance, would carry more conviction if she seemed ever to consider that the Chapel Perilous is a more likely goal for his quest than the Celestial City, or if she took account of the last lines of the poem" ("Rehabilitating Browning").

See also Lionel Stevenson's discovery of overlooked sources, in "The Pertinacious Victorian Poets," 23-24.

[15] "Childe Roland" was written in a three-day period during which Browning fulfilled his resolution to write one poem a day. The other two poems were "Women and Roses" and "Love Among the Ruins." The rose garden of "Women and Roses," with its erotic imagery, and the landscape of the Roman ruins, become the wasted, ravaged land of experience in "Childe Roland," the fantasy nightmare poem. There is some controversy over the order in which the three poems were written. Contrast DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 229, and Huebenthal, "The Dating of Browning's 'Love Among the Ruins,' 'Women and Roses,' and 'Childe Roland.'"

[16] Dahl, "The Victorian Wasteland," 34.

[17] And there is the drowned Phoenecian sailor of The Waste Land as well as the river rat of this passage from "The Fire Sermon":

> A rat crept softly through the vegetation
> Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
> While I was fishing in the dull canal
> On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
> Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
> And on the king my father's death before him.
>
> Eliot, Selected Poems, 58

[18] Melchiori, in Browning's Poetry of Reticence, 117, refers to the trampled mud and plash which recur in Pompilia's monologue of The Ring and the Book as she speaks of her real mother as a "plashy pool" where

> . . . every beast
> O' the field was wont to break that fountain-fence,
> Trample the silver into mud so murk
> Heaven could not find itself reflected there. (VII, 867-870)

[19] In connection with Lazarus, there is a three-stanza simile in "Childe Roland" involving a man who hovers between life and death, listening to his friends speeding up his demise in their conversation, much as in Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning."

[20] It is significant that there have been images of enclosure and imprisonment throughout the poems we have discussed, as in the stanza from "Holy Cross Day" beginning "Higgledy piggledy, packed we lie, / Rats in a hamper, swine in a stye," and in the following passage from "A Lover's Quarrel," where the two are trapped together by choice, before their Eden is broken into:

> Dearest, three months ago!
> When we lived blocked-up with snow,—
> When the wind would edge
> In and out his wedge,
> In, as far as the point could go--
> Not to our ingle, though,
> Where we loved each the other so!

There love is inverted and womb-like.

[21] Raisor, "The Failure of Browning's Childe Roland," 103.

[22] Melchiori traces the decline of the tower, what she feels is the major symbol of (Browning's) "fear," throughout the canon: in Sordello the tower at Goito, which he eventually finds ruined (I, 381-385, II, 956-958, 978-980), the tower in "Love Among the Ruins," "in which he consciously tried to re-establish his values, which the nightmare [of "Childe Roland," written the previous day] had destroyed" (Browning's Poetry of Reticence, 137). The tower in ruins is found in the Roman campagna of The Ring and the Book. The less significant the tower, the more easily its challenge can be met. However, this is not true of "Childe Roland," nor is the tower in that poem so negative as Melchiori sees it.

[23] Whiting, The Brownings, 261. Browning wrote four interesting dream poems, psychologically extremely modern, which describe the breakdown of a relationship between a man and a woman. These were under the general heading of "Bad Dreams," published in Asolando, 1889.

[24] Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," Standard Edition, V, 589.

[25] Roppen and Sommer, Strangers and Pilgrims, 305-306.

[26] Ibid., 306. See J. M. Cohen, "The Young Robert Browning," 245, and Betty Miller, Robert Browning, 168.

[27] Melchiori, Browning's Poetry of Reticence, 117-118. Her tendency is to psychoanalyze Browning through his poetry, or to use his life to colour her reading of a poem. She states that Browning was not fully aware of himself when he wrote such a black, despondent poem as "Childe Roland" where evil is the final goal. It is as if Browning had suddenly revealed himself (however one-sidedly) in a poem which is far closer to the truth than the greater part of his poetry with its optimistic philosophy. See Trilling's warning, however, n. 28, below.

[28] Lionel Trilling writes, "Even if the author's intention were, as it cannot be, precisely determinable, the meaning of a work cannot lie in the author's intention alone. It must also lie in its effect" ("Freud and Literature," 46). He writes even more firmly about unconscious intention: "Criticism understands that the artist's statement of his conscious intention, though it is sometimes useful, cannot finally determine meaning. How much less can we know from his unconscious intention considered as something apart from the whole work? Surely very little that can be called conclusive or scientific. For, as Freud himself points out, we are not in a position to question the artist; we must apply the technique of dream analysis to his symbols, but, as Freud says with some heat, those people do not understand his theory who think that a dream may be interpreted without the dreamer's free association with the multitudinous details of his dream" (ibid., 47).

[29] From a speech given on the occasion of Freud's seventieth birthday, quoted in Trilling, "Freud and Literature," 32. Norman O. Brown in Life Against Death essentially summarizes Trilling's essay: "The discovery of psychoanalytical themes in art is put in proper perspective, as we academics say, by the doctrine that 'there is no single meaning to any work of art.' By means of this cliché the house that Freud built is absorbed into the stately mansion of traditional criticism. We are free to recognize a psychoanalytic theme in art, but we are not compelled to; and if we do recognize a psychoanalytic theme, we need not be disturbed because we are free to drown it in a rich orchestration of multiple meanings. Similarly the possibilities opened up by the analogues between artistic technique and the processes of the unconscious are put in proper perspective by the traditional tribute to 'the formal control of the conscious mind.' . . . The ego remains the master in the house of art (56, quoting from "Freud and Literature," 46, 50). Although Brown is undeniably scornful of this compromise in even trying to keep the best of both worlds, we can discover something of value in each approach.

[30] Baker, ed., Pippa Passes and Shorter Poems, xxvii.

[31] Herbert Read, for instance, selects evidence for "superrealism" in many English poems through the centuries (Selected Writings, 247).

[32] See Tomkins, The World of Marcel Duchamp, 95ff. "The unconscious mind, as Freud discovered, is a rolling sea of buried memories, primordial drives and unthinkable desires. When it surges over into the

conscious mind in fever hallucinations or vivid dreams, it can be far more real than everyday 'reality'; at its extremes, the unleashed unconscious mind can create illusions of paralyzing horror or transcendent beauty. This is the twilight world which . . . Surrealism. . . seeks to explore" (ibid., 108).

[33] Roppen and Sommer, Strangers and Pilgrims, 306.

[34] Ibid., 306.

[35] Read, Selected Writings, 270.

[36] Ibid., 270.

[37] Freud, "Interpretation of Dreams," Standard Edition, IV, 49.

[38] Ibid., 50.

[39] Ibid., 277.

[40] Further analogies between dream-process and poem-process occur when we read Freud's description of the repressed impulse which cannot come forth in action, since we are asleep, so it has to travel "in the direction of perception and to be content with a hallucinated satisfaction. The latent dream-thoughts are thus transformed into a collection of sensory images and visual scenes. It is as they travel on this course that what seems to us so novel and so strange occurs to them. All the linguistic instruments by which we express the subtler relations of thought . . . are dropped, because there are no means of representing them; just as in a primitive language without any grammar, only the raw material of thought is expressed and abstract terms are taken back to the concrete ones that are at their basis. What is left over after this may well appear disconnected. The copious employment of symbols, which have become alien to conscious thinking, for representing certain objects and processes is in harmony alike with the archaic regression in the mental apparatus and with the demands of the censorship" ("New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," Standard Edition, XXII, 20). Here, then, is the fuller psychological explanation not only for the visual nature of experience in "Childe Roland," but also for the discontinuity of language which occurs in Sordello, and is expressed both in the form and content of that work. Freud's statement about "raw material of thought" versus "abstract things" takes us back to our discussion of Pound and Imagism in relation to Browning.

[41] Freud, "Interpretation of Dreams," Standard Edition, V, 343-344.

[42] Freud, "On Dreams," Standard Edition, V, 659.

[43] The dream "has a double function; on the one hand it is ego-syntonic [in conformity with the ego], since, by getting rid of the stimuli which are interfering with sleep, it serves the wish to sleep; on the other hand it allows a repressed instinctual impulse to obtain

the satisfaction that is possible in these circumstances, in the form of the hallucinated fulfilment of a wish" (Freud, "New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," Standard Edition, XXII, 19).

[44] Stoehr, The Dreamer's Stance, 70-71.

[45] See page 151 and n. 27, above.

[46] Roma King writes in The Focusing Artifice, 91: "'Childe Roland' is a montage of personal experiences described by the traveler himself within a highly a-logical, symbolic frame."

[47] Freud, "New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," Standard Edition, XXII, 21.

[48] Herbert Read, for example, separates those images which "occurred to me in my dream" from the "conscious image produced in the process of writing the poem" which he calls metaphor (Selected Writings, 274).

[49] Brown, Love's Body, 241.

[50] Freud, Collected Papers, V, 182.

[51] Freud, "The Ego and the Id," Standard Edition, XIX, 30: "The transformation of object-libido into narcissistic libido which thus takes place obviously implies an abandonment of sexual aims, a desexualization--a kind of sublimation, therefore."

[52] Chesterton, Robert Browning, 159.

[53] This landscape negates Freud's symbolism which states that "many landscapes in dreams, especially any containing bridges or wooded hills, may clearly be recognized as descriptions of the genitals" ("Interpretation of Dreams," Standard Edition, V, 356). In "Childe Roland" such growth has been denuded, although its presence is seen in the fulfilled landscape of "By the Fire-side."

[54] Frye, Fearful Symmetry, 368.

[55] "To represent castration symbolically, the dream-work makes use of baldness, hair-cutting, falling out of teeth and decapitation" (Freud, "Interpretation of Dreams," Standard Edition, V, 357).

[56] Yeats, "Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop," Selected Poetry, 161.

[57] See Melchiori, Browning's Poetry of Reticence, Appendix C.

[58] Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," Standard Edition, XIV, 136. See Brown, Love's Body, 227: "The body that is identical with environment. As in dreams the whole landscape is made out of the dreamer's own body; so in totemism the human essence is projected into animal or plant--the very act of unconscious symbol-formation."

[59] Freud, "Interpretation of Dreams," Standard Edition, IV, 160.

[60] Ibid., V, 595.

[61] Ibid., IV, 279.

[62] See I Corinthians xv, 22. The theme of Christ as the new Adam is a recurrent one for André Gide, who ranged Browning in his "four-star constellation" along with Blake, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky. See March, Gide and the Hound of Heaven, 258.

[63] See Ruth Sullivan's article, "Browning's 'Childe Roland' and Dante's 'Inferno.'"

[64] Northrop Frye considers the St. George-Perseus legends as romantic analogies, or descendants, "of a myth of a waste land restored to life by a fertility god. In the myth, then, the dragon and the old king would be identified. We can in fact concentrate the myth still further into an Oedipus fantasy in which the hero is not the old king's son-in-law but his son, and the rescued damsel the hero's mother. If the story were a private dream such identifications would be made as a matter of course" (Anatomy of Criticism, 137). Browning's dream poem incorporates some of the myth, some of the legend, and some of the displacement into the Oedipus complex. On this level, the imagined killing could be of a father figure. For a discussion of patricide also see Brown, Love's Body, 103, and 164-165. Brother-killing is linked of course with the primal murder, and with many of the grail legends. In terms of the dream, all persons and objects encountered are identical on one level with the dreamer--hence the reference to suicide. For further discussion of the sick king, the fisher king, the healer, the blighted land, see Jessie Weston, From Ritual to Romance, especially Chap. IX, "The Fisher King."

[65] Brown, Life Against Death, 163-164. See also Freud, An Outline of Psychoanalysis, 79-80.

[66] Freud, "Interpretation of Dreams," Standard Edition, V, 410.

[67] Cirlot, Dictionary of Symbols, 79-80. Melchiori, in Browning's Poetry of Reticence, 116, makes reference to mutilated limbs as frequent images of horror.

[68] Freud, "Interpretation of Dreams," Standard Edition, V, 356.

[69] Cirlot, Dictionary of Symbols, 272.

[70] Ibid., 328.

[71] Freud, Collected Papers, IV, 184, (quoting from Die Traumdeutung, section VI).

[72] Cirlot, Dictionary of Symbols, 1.

[73] Ibid., 68.

[74] We are told that "present-day psychology defines the dragon-symbol as 'something terrible to overcome,' for only he who conquers the dragon becomes a hero. Jung goes so far as to say that the dragon is a mother-image (that is, a mirror of the maternal principle or of the unconscious) and that it expresses the individual's repugnance towards incest and the fear of committing it, although he also suggests that it quite simply represents evil" (ibid., 84).

[75] Melchiori, Browning's Poetry of Reticence,114.

[76] Ibid., 120. Mrs. Melchiori finds the origin for her supposition in the earlier presence of dragon or snake allusions in Pauline, where the monster is identified with hatred.

[77] See Chapter IV, n. 36, below, for my synopsis of the myth and the criticism on Browning's use of it.

[78] Graves, Greek Myths, I, 244. Also see pages 174 and 240-241 for the complete Perseus-Andromeda myth.

[79] DeVane, A Browning Handbook,345.

[80] Ibid., 46. Quoting from Pauline, Forster and Dyce Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, which contains Mill's criticism in its margins.

[81] Blake, "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," pl. 14, Complete Writings, 154.

[82] "Sleep is regressive; in dreaming we return to dream time--the age of heroes and ancestors . . . " (Brown, Love's Body, 46).

[83] Cirlot, Dictionary of Symbols, 75.

[84] Ibid., 326-327.

[85] The Fool is said to correspond "to the irrational, the active instinct capable of sublimation, but related at the same time to blind impulse and the unconscious," (Cirlot, Dictionary of Symbols, 106) and this is also relevant to the Fool in King Lear. Further, in ritual ceremonies "when the normal or conscious appears to become infirm or perverted, in order to regain health and goodness it becomes necessary to turn to the dangerous, the unconscious and the abnormal," (ibid., 106) and this is the side of man represented by the Fool and embodied in the tower. Also see Parsons, "Childe Roland and the Fool," where the tower is "an external representation of the first real confrontation of the fool, Childe Roland, with his own sins" (27).

[86] Freud, "Interpretation of Dreams," Standard Edition, IV, 307-308.

[87] Ibid., 308.

[88] Cirlot, in explaining the meaning which a castle may have in the quest, helps us to "see" more clearly Roland's Dark Tower. A black castle or Castle of Darkness signifies the entrance to the Other World, or is symbolic of Pluto's abode. It has been seen that Roland's goal may be achieved, paradoxically, through the very forces of evil which appear throughout the poem (Dictionary of Symbols, 37). See also Jessie Weston, From Ritual to Romance, Chap. XIII, "The Perilous Chapel."

[89] Frye, Fearful Symmetry, 431.

[90] King, The Focusing Artifice, 91.

[91] Death is a way for the nightmare to end and something new to be born, for, "Symbolically, death represents the end of an epoch, particularly when it takes the form of sacrifice or the desire for self-destruction in the face of unendurable tension" (Cirlot, Dictionary of Symbols, 74). There is a picture on the Death-card on the Tarot pack which contains some of the surrealist elements seen in the landscape of "Childe Roland": "The ground is strewn with human remains, but these remains, like those in legends and folklore, have the appearance of living beings. . . . Everything in this enigma-card tends to ambivalence, underlining the fact that if life is, in itself, closely bound up with death . . . death is also the source of life--and not only of spiritual life but of the resurrection of matter as well" (ibid., 74-75).

Joyce Meyers in "'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came': A Nightmare Confrontation with Death," stresses that there is no proof of victory over death in the trumpet-blast, since Roland never even confronts, never mind conquers, the tower, nor does it conquer him. "The poem thus ends, as dream sequences usually do, inconclusively, and this is the only way it could end. The dreamer always awakens as his nightmare brings him to the brink of death, for it is one thing to face the stark reality of death and another to witness one's own demise" (359). The trumpet-blast awakens the dreamer quite literally, then, from his dream.

[92] Baker, ed., Pippa Passes and Shorter Poems, quoted in 299, note.

[93] Brown, Life Against Death, 308.

[94] Nietzsche, Birth of Tragedy, 26.

[95] Brown, Love's Body, 161.

[96] "The dreamer awakens not from a body but to a body. Not ascent from body to spirit, but the descent of spirit into body: incarnation not sublimation" (ibid., 222). "For the Christian poet the Incarnation is the symbol incarnate of which all other symbols in literature are but imitations. It is by analogy with this act of God that the poet may attempt to create--to give flesh to his words as God did to the Word" (Whitla, The Central Truth, 10).

[97] Browning's Essay On Shelley, 78.

[98] "On the one hand, dreams, neurotic symptoms, and all other manifestations of the unconscious, such as fantasy, represent in some degree or other a flight or alienation from a reality which is found unbearable. On the other hand, they represent a return to the pleasure-principle; they are substitutes for pleasure denied by reality. In this compromise between the two conflicting systems, the pleasure desired is reduced or distorted or even transformed to pain. Under the conditions of repression, under the domination of the reality-principle, the pursuit of pleasure is degraded to the status of a symptom" (Brown, Life Against Death, 9).

## Chapter IV

[1] Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, I, 22, (Feb. 17, 1845). Elizabeth Barrett writes, ". . . in fact, you have not written the R. B. poem yet--your rays fall obliquely rather than directly straight. I see you only in your moon. Do tell all of yourself that you can & will . . before the R. B. poem comes out" (ibid., I, 22 [Feb. 17, 1845] ). She is replying to a reference by Browning to "R. B. a poem" (ibid., I, 17,[Feb. 11, 1845]).

See also Robert Langbaum, "Browning and the Question of Myth." He describes The Ring and the Book as "Browning's climactic attempt to give us a total vision of life. He brings several dramatic monologues, several points of view together, in order to collapse the 'prismatic hues' into 'the pure white light'--in order to make explicit what is implicit in all the dramatic monologues, that the relative is an index to the absolute, that the relative is our way of apprehending the absolute" (577). I disagree that Browning is a relativist poet, however.

[2] See Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks II, Browning's Roman Murder Story, Chap. II, "The Poem's Design," for various approaches to the poem's structure.

E.D.H. Johnson writes: "The ring metaphor . . . operates in two ways to call attention to the poem's pluralistic implications. In the first place, it symbolizes the plasticity of factual reality. And secondly, through likening the separate monologues to the segments of a circle within the circumference of which the elusive truth resides, its aspect altering with every change in perspective, the poet expresses his sense of the multiform nature of all truth" ("Robert Browning's Pluralistic Universe: A Reading of The Ring and the Book," 23).

See also Mary Rose Sullivan, "The Function of Book I in The Ring and the Book" and Whitla, The Central Truth, Chap. IV. The latter writes of the ring metaphor: "It is the symbol of the work of art, of its totality, its completeness. Furthermore, it is the symbol of poetic truth because of its use as a metaphor, and because of the meanings which Browning gives to its ingredients. It represents the artifact, the poetic and creative act, the highest attainable form of human truth, even the symbolic expression of Divine truth" (104).

[3] See Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, Chap. III, "A Relativist Poem," for his reading of The Ring and the Book.

[4] See L. J. Swingle, "Truth and The Ring and the Book: A Negative View." Swingle gives an interpretation of the poem which centers on ontology rather than on truth. The act of murder is restored in Time by the poetic creation, and lives in the poem, gradually dying out by the poem's end as we are already seeing it once more in time past. Thus the ring must begin again and the poem be resuscitated anew by each reader. Also see Altick and Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story, Chap. III, "Our Human Testimony False," and pages 21, 121-122.

[5] The many allusions to the Nativity and Passion, especially as applied to Pompilia, are extremely significant, for Incarnation touches the poem at many levels, as Whitla in The Central Truth makes his central hypothesis. See Altick and Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story, 228, n. 1, for a note on Christian symbolism. And Shiv Kumar writes in "The Moment in the Dramatic Monologues of Robert Browning," "The moment in Browning's poetry is akin, in many respects, to the existential 'atoms of eternity.' It is not merely chronos, it is kairos, or 'the infinite reflection of eternity in time'" (92, quoting Kierkegaard, Concept of Dread, 79).

[6] McLuhan: Hot & cool, ed. Stearn, 133.

[7] McLuhan, Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations, Section 14.

[8] Altick and Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story, 32.

[9] For work done in this area see especially ibid., Chap. VIII, "How That Staunch Image Serves at Every Turn!" and Honan, Browning's Characters.

[10] See II, 558-569, 607-612, 627-629, 653-654. See also Guido's jewel metaphor: IX, 195-210.

[11] Eve and the Virgin alternate to suggest experience and innocence as in VII, 1733; IX, 700, 760-761. Altick and Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story, 241-247, summarize the snake-serpent-worm figures. They also collect the devil-hell-quagmire figures which they see as the source of the Garden of Eden serpent (247-252).

On the subject of the Garden of Eden motifs, W. David Shaw writes: "Despite many pagan anachronisms in the allusions to the St. George and Perseus legends, we can discern in the climactic orations of Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and the Pope, the elements, broken and reassembled, of a biblical myth. This mythic action is more privileged than the partisan rhetoric of the other points of view, for the testimony of this holy triumverate is addressed to God, and its motives are therefore disinterested. The basis of their myth is a metaphoric identification of Pompilia's foster parents with Adam and Eve. In yielding to the wiles of the Satanic Guido, the Comparini are admitting into their domestic Eden a son-in-law who is a demonic parody of

Christ, the second Adam. The hero of this myth is the Messianic deliverer, Caponsacchi, whose crusade to right the wrong choice made by the first Eve issues in his rescue of the second Eve, Pompilia, his victory over the Edenic serpent, Guido, and his redemption of what is at once a society and a bride" (*The Dialectic Temper*, 278).

[12] See V, 654ff.; III, 214-217; VI, 1336-39; XII, 561, for example.

[13] See Altick and Loucks, *Browning's Roman Murder Story*, 291, on Bottini's appetite for apples and their connection with Eden and the Hesperides.

[14] See ibid., 240, for a chart showing the changes in appearance in Book II of the principle characters. On page 275 are charted the large number of recurring metaphors linking Books II and III.

[15] That the historical Pompilia did lie about her ability to read and write and about her arrival at the Inn in Castelnuovo is the contention of H. B. Charlton, "Poetry and Truth, an Aspect of Browning's *The Ring and the Book*." And J.E. Shaw, "The 'Donna Angelicata' in *The Ring and the Book*," demonstrates that the letters supposedly from Pompilia to Caponsacchi, which Browning in his version makes out to be forgeries by Guido, are historically genuine. Thus Browning has transformed the Francesca of the Old Yellow Book into the "Donna Angelicata," Pompilia.

[16] Most often the scorpion is designated to Guido. See III, 1162-71. But cf. XI, 1597.

[17] Williams, "Figurative Imagery in *The Ring and the Book*: A Study In Browning's Poetic Technique," 2153.

[18] Cf. Altick and Loucks: "It is not only in the humourous vein that Browning defies the proprieties of Victorian Society. The passage in which Pompilia describes her refusal to cleave to her husband, her flight to the Archbishop, and the Archbishop's exasperated lecture on wifely duty . . . involves an unusually frank expression of the necessity of sex education for girls: [quotes VII, 798-803]" (*Browning's Roman Murder Story*, 283, n.1). Also see Browning's earlier poem, "A Light Woman." I fell that the Archbishop's lecture reflects more upon his manipulative powers than it does upon lack of sexual knowledge on the part of Pompilia—or nineteenth-century girls.

[19] Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, IV, 147.

[20] See Melchiori, *Browning's Poetry of Reticence*: "In the key scene at the inn in *The Ring and the Book* . . . images from 'Childe Roland' cluster thickly in the version given by Pompilia. Pompilia herself figures as Andromeda or the Christian martyr-maid . . . [IX, 968-972]. In *The Ring and the Book* the dragon finds his match in St. George, who . . . is, together with Perseus, one of the symbols of Caponsacchi, but Pompilia in her narration of the story uses words which recall the adventure of that other knight, Childe Roland: . . .

[VII, 1528, 1532-34, 1538-41]. So this key scene in *The Ring and the Book* is set on the same grounds as 'Childe Roland,' and the story of his end is told. In 'that tragical red eve' Pompilia describes her own feelings of defeat, and draws a picture of herself which reflects the situation of Childe Roland at the moment of trial: [VII, 1546-49, 1551-53]. The red light of the scene stresses its apocalyptic quality, the magical return of day in 'Childe Roland': [187-189] . . . repeated in the threatening sunset in an earlier key scene in *Sordello* . . . . And in this supernatural light . . . [V, 934-936] begins 'Fate's second marvellous cycle.' The specific reference here to the end of the world, the moment at which the tomb will split, and to the beginning of a new cycle, show the positive elements of the vision, the vision which was to be reversed in the 'Childe Roland' nightmare where the ultimate trial takes place in the same dramatic light, but where the end of the world means Judgment Day" (132-134). The end of *Guido's* world and his Judgment Day are also synonomous. And I feel that much of the Childe Roland patterning falls in Guido's monologues. On the other hand, I have also shown more positive aspects to Roland's final vision than Melchiori acknowledges.

[21] Curle,ed., *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, 137 (Nov.15, 1868).

[22] Ibid., 137.

[23] Ibid., 138.

[24] Ibid., 138-139.

[25] Ibid., 148 (Dec.3, 1868).

[26] Ibid., 144.

[27] Ibid., 144.

[28] Ibid., 144-145. Another answer might be found in Langbaum's "Browning and the Question of Myth": "In symbolism, there is no high or low; symbolism demonstrates that we can know the so-called high only by knowing the so-called low. There you have the error of the Darwinians—and it is no digression for Browning to associate them in 'Francis Furini' with the prudish enemies of the nude--who think that their knowledge of man's low origin negates his spirituality" (581).

[29] Johnson, "Robert Browning's Pluralistic Universe: A Reading of *The Ring and the Book*," 31. W.O. Raymond feels there is "a residuum of truth in the hostile criticism of the poet's concept of evil. Often as Browning is preoccupied with the problem of evil, he never, even while condemning it, feels that loathing and horror of evil which characterizes the prophets of the Old Testament. He does not, as *The Ring and the Book* is ample testimony, shut his eyes to it as Emerson did. One would hesitate to say of him, as it has been said of Milton contrasted with Dante, that in his representation of Hell 'he never saw the damned.' Yet the gulf between Dante's utter abhorrence of evil and Browning's reaction to it is wide" (*The Infinite Moment*, 230).

See also 223-233 for Raymond's fuller discussion of Browning's interpretation of evil.

[30] Curle, ed., Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood, 153 (Jan. 21, 1869).

[31] Ibid., 152.

[32] Ibid., 156 (Jan. 22, 1869).

[33] Ibid., 159-160 (Jan. 30, 1869).

[34] See VII, 108-113, 210-214, for references to the dream working itself out in Pompilia's son Gaetano; VII, 198-201, where Pompilia, remembering a tapestry from her childhood through which she imagined herself the figure of Daphne being metamorphosed into a tree, concludes that all of her life has been such a "fantastic," "fairy thing" which "fades and fades"; VI, 818-821, in which Caponsacchi repeats the dreams Pompilia has told him. She cried out to "good great men" to help her, but as in dreams, could not get them to hear (VI, 825-826). She says to Caponsacchi, "For now the dream gets to involve yourself" (V, 862). She had thought him dishonest, but now, face to face, she knows "Here too has been dream-work, delusion too," (VI, 874). The "dream-work" has been done by Guido, not by the ones involved in the nightmare. This group of dream allusions reported by Caponsacchi was actually spoken by Pompilia during her dream; they are part of the dream-elements for she is beginning to realize, and want to wake from, the unreality of her life. In her own monologue, the dream is over and she forgets all the details, the images. (Yet she does manage to describe her past life in the rest of her monologue.)

[35] "Although it was plain enough who had killed the Comparini, the really important matters associated with the case--the secret motives, the unexpected hopes and fears and passions of the characters--was left in doubt. To discover them was a task most agreeable to a poet who had a strong interest in both crime and human psychology. No matter if complete understanding was beyond reach, [I, 828-829] one of the most fundamental of Browning's tenets was that relish for a quest was directly proportional to the impossibility of full success" (Altick and Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story, 19).

[36] It is a requisite, at this point, to bring in more background material on the Perseus-Andromeda myth and all its cognate myths, for it comprises a set of symbols and interlocking themes which are so important as to demand frequent reference through this discussion of The Ring and the Book. See Chapter III, 171-173, for a discussion of the myth as it relates to "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

The myth is summarized with all its traditional detail by H.J. Rose, A Handbook of Greek Mythology, 273: "Arrived at the Gorgons' habitation, [Perseus] found them asleep, and flying close to Medusa, but with his back turned towards her, he looked at her image reflected in his shield and was thus guided to cut off her head. With this in his wallet, he escaped from the two other Gorgons, who could follow him only by sound, as his cap made him invisible. On the way home, passing a certain place on the coast . . he saw a virgin of wonderful beauty chained to a rock. This was Andromeda, daughter of Kapheus king of the Ethiopians and his wife Kassiepeia or Kassiopeia, who had offended the sea-goddesses by saying that she was more beautiful than they. Therefore Poseidon had sent a sea-monster which could not be appeased but by sacrifice of the offending queen's daughter. Perseus, who had fallen in love with Andromeda at first sight, then and there offered to kill the monster if he might marry her. The parents consented, Perseus after a furious battle killed the monster (or turned it to stone by showing it the Gorgon's head), and married Andromeda, but not without having to fight and overcome a strong force led by a former suitor, Phineus."

Northrop Frye paraphrases the myth to bring into relief its romance-quest elements: "A land ruled by a helpless old king is laid waste by a sea-monster, to whom one young person after another is offered to be devoured, until the lot falls on the king's daughter:at that point the hero arrives, kills the dragon, marries the daughter,and succeeds to the kingdom. Again, as with comedy, we have a simple pattern with many complex elements. The ritual analogies of the myth suggest that the monster is the sterility of the land itself, and the the sterility of the land is present in the age and impotence of the king, who is sometimes suffering from an incurable malady or wound, like Amfortas in Wagner. His position is that of Adonis overcome by the boar of winter, Adonis's traditional thigh-wound being as close to castration symbolically as it is anatomically" (Anatomy of Criticism, 189). Frye discusses also the sea-monster, leviathan, of the Old Testament, which becomes in Christian symbolism an element of "an elaborate dragon-killing metaphor. . . in which the hero is Christ (often represented in art standing on a prostrate monster), the dragon Satan, the impotent old king Adam, whose son Christ becomes, and the rescued bride the Church" (ibid., 189).

DeVane in his article "The Virgin and the Dragon" (1947) first considered in detail the use of the myth in Browning's poetry, and briefly summarizes his conclusions in A Browning Handbook, 345. He tells us that "Browning used the Perseus-Andromeda myth and its cognate legend of St. George slaying the dragon no less than thirty times in The Ring and the Book. Each speaker's version and interpretation of the myth is a touchstone of his character"(ibid., 345). Altick and Loucks in Browning's Roman Murder Story cite these variations and allusions to the myth--and others: see 19-20 ; 94, 94, n.7; charts: 230, 232, 233, 234-36; 239-40; 244; 259.

Langbaum, in "Browning and the Question of Myth," feels that apart from the Christian myth, there is a specific myth which provides an underlying pattern to The Ring and the Book, even though Browning does not use myth quite as do Joyce and Eliot. "We know that Browning's imagination was dominated throughout his career, by the image of the beautiful Andromeda, chained naked to the rock, waiting hopelessly for the serpent to come out of the sea to devour her, but waiting also--although she does not consciously know this--for Perseus to descend miraculously . . . . to rescue her. The combination of sexual and spiritual ramifications gives the image its strength and validity"(578).

This myth in The Ring and the Book "is used rather as the vegetation myth is used in The Waste Land. We are made to see a continuity between the pagan and Christian versions of the same myth. And all the characters seem inevitably to have some memory of the myth--though the debased characters remember it in a debased form; while the cynical characters, who see Caponsacchi's rescue as an abduction, turn the myth into its obverse, the myth of Helen and Paris. Nevertheless, the references remain only references--mythological allusions to illustrate points that are really being made discursively" (ibid.,578). Langbaum's final qualification is surely misleading, for the image and the idea are dependent on each other.

Whitla in The Central Truth stresses the spirituality of St. George-Perseus: "Caponsacchi's moment of whiteness is so intense and concentrated that it completely illuminates his whole horizon . . ." (122;see also 123-125 for his discussion of the myth as a whole).

[37] See Altick and Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story, 284-286. For other examples of the Gothic characteristics of the horrible and brutal, such as Guido's horrific ideas of "jest," see II, 1488-1503, V, 962-966, 1226-35, X, 84-85. "With these examples, however, the humor darkens: woven into this sequence of superficially incidental passages is a thread of grimness. What seem at first to be merely comic or grotesque fancies shade off into the tragic. The violence present in the cruel Comparini murders is reflected in a general depravity among men. Mutilation, both of body and of spirit, reminds us how much nearer we are to the brutes than to the angels" (ibid., 286).

[38] See III, 1428-30, V, 21-28.

[39] See Altick and Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story, 49-51, 56, 72-73, 74, 158, 185, 189, 219-220, 221, 248, 260, 269, and 302, for Christ imagery used in connection with Guido.

[40] Other Half-Rome depicts the poem's action as a vast underground to be illuminated:

> Now begins
> The tenebrific passage of the tale:
> How hold a light, display the cavern's gorge?
> How, in this phase of the affair, show truth? (III, 788-791)

The gorge, symbolically, is "the crack in the conscious life through which the inner pattern of the individual psyche . . . may be glimpsed" (Cirlot, Dictionary of Symbols, 75).

[41] Other Half-Rome "images" Guido betaking himself home "After the spring that failed,--the wildcat's way" (III, 1324). This is after he has caught up to Caponsacchi and Pompilia in the inn.

Pompilia asks Conti, the cousin of Guido, to carry her off but he replies,

> Guido has claws that scratch, shows feline teeth;
> A formidabler foe than I dare fret:
> Give me a dog to deal with, twice the size!" (VII, 1315-17)

His home is called a "cat's cage" by that cousin (VI, 426).

Other Half-Rome also describes Guido's cruelty springing, like "an uncaged beast," "On the weak shoulders of his wife" who cried to higher authorities that they take "the claws from out her flesh" (III, 965-971).

Guido in turn describes how he would have bid to defend himself in the trial for murdering Pompilia, had she not lived to tell the truth. He would have pleaded self-defence, saying that Pompilia and Caponsacchi sprang on him "like so many tiger-cats, /Glad of the chance to end the intruder" (XI, 1716-17).

[42] See Yetman, "'Count Guido Franceschini': The Villain as Artist in The Ring and the Book." DeVane writes that Guido in Book V "makes an amazingly clever defence of himself by detailing with transparent candor the course of his life, the hardships and humilities of the poorer nobility as they wait for help from great patrons, the treachery of the Comparini, and the faithlessness of his wife. So good a case does he make for himself that some have been willing to acquit him upon the spot, but for the poet's whole conception one must see Book XI. There the wolf sheds his sheep's clothing" (A Browning Handbook, 578). (See above, 241-244, and notes 44, 50, and 53, below.)

[43] See Altick and Loucks, Browning's Roman Murder Story, 252-257. The culmination of the wolf metaphor occurs in Guido's second monologue; see page 244, below.

[44] "That Browning gave Guido a second monologue . . . must be set down to his delight in the creation and the analysis of slippery villains. . . . There is little authority in the Yellow Book, or in the other documents, for Guido's full revelation of himself" (DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 335). DeVane considers the Guido of Book XI to be Browning's "own amazing creation." "As we read the Old Yellow Book we can see that Browning has taken a weak and rather stupid, though occasionally shrewd, specimen of a degenerate nobility and made a consummate and intellectualized villain of him, one who is not altogether unworthy of being placed beside Shakespeare's Iago . . . He shows a wolfish nature, and shows that he has all the time been motivated by sheer hatred of his superiors, his Church, and above all of Pompilia--a hatred as subtle and pervasive as Iago's hatred of the decent people about him" (ibid., 336).

[45] Curle, ed., Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood, 174-175 (Feb. 1869).

[46] The Journals of André Gide, 107.

[47] Sullivan, Browning's Voices, 206, n. 18.

[48] Ricks, "Introduction," The Brownings: Letters and Poetry, 28.

[49] Ibid., 28-29.

[50] King, The Focusing Artifice, 136. DeVane writes: "The records provide Guido with a very edifying end, and according to them he died repentantly and gallantly. The Secondary Source, 'The Death of the Wife-Murderer Guido Franceschini, by Beheading,' gave Browning his occasion: '. . . . When he had made the confessor announce that he was reconciled, he adjusted his neck upon mannaia and, with the name of Jesus on his lips, he was beheaded'"(A Browning Handbook, 336). In Book XI, however, Guido's end has a different emphasis according to DeVane: "Guido's monologue rises . . . to the perfect crescendo of terror in the closing lines when the Company of Death approach his cell . . . . For my part, I am inclined to believe with Mr. Cook that no spark but abject terror disturbs the clod which is Guido" (ibid., 336).

[51] King, The Focusing Artifice, 146, 164.

[52] Conrad, Three Great Tales, 297.

[53] Peckham, Victorian Revolutionaries, 94. However, Langbaum in a recent article argues as follows: "The crux is Guido's final line . . . . Those who consider Guido not saved see in the line the climax of his cowardice. I and a few others see in it Guido's recognition of Pompilia's goodness and his own evil, which suggests his moral regeneration. The external evidence of Browning's intention cancels itself out. My argument rests therefore on an alaysis which shows that Browning has planted so many signposts pointing toward Guido's salvation, that if the salvation does not come off the signposts lead to nothing and the poem to that extent fails. . . . To see Guido as saved is to understand the poem's design--to see why Browning gave Guido two monologues and how the Pope's monologue leads into Guido's second. It is to understand the poem's relativism, that all selves are justified as part of God's scheme" ("Is Guido Saved? The Meaning of Browning's Conclusion to The Ring and the Book"). Langbaum is consistent in his continuing view of Browning as a relativist poet.

[54] See DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 334-335 for a summation of the place the Pope's monologue is generally agreed to have in the poem.

[55] Ibid., 345.

[56] Drew, "Review" [of Browning's Roman Murder Story], 372.

[57] See, for example, W. O. Raymond's essay on "The Statue and the Bust" in The Infinite Moment. He writes: "In The Ring and the Book there is no measure in the contrast between his extolling of the good as represented in Pompilia and Caponsacchi and his denunciation of evil as represented in Guido. Yet, because he does regard evil as 'stuff for transmuting,' he holds that the shirking of the moral conflict is the worst sin of all" (227).

[58] DeVane feels that one ought not "to deplore the fine analysis which the Pope makes of Euripides' theology (X, 1670-1790), for Browning had been reading Euripides ever since his wife's death . . ." (A Browning Handbook, 335).

[59] "Browning's quest leads him to truth through the images of the characters, and other personal symbols, like the ring, the book, stars, fire, the saint, and so on. The poet is moving an incantation of images under a control. The movement takes place in time, but the incantation speaks of eternity. The control, for Browning, is the Incarnation" (Whitla, *The Central Truth*, 141).

And Altick and Loucks write: "The supreme miracle, assent to the truth of which is the crucial act of faith a Christian must perform, is of course the Incarnation. To Browning the Franceschini story is an equivalent of the story of the Incarnation, not in substance (though we have noticed several incidental resemblances) but in purpose and effect. Just as the Gospels gather the materials relating to the life and teachings of God incarnate in man, so the Old Yellow Book gathers materials relating to another sequence of events also demonstrative of God's love; and *The Ring and the Book* is an attempt to do for those historical facts what Browning regards it as indispensable to do for the Bible, whose effectiveness and credibility, as history, have declined with the passage of years.

> The act, over and ended, falls and fades:
> What was once seen, grows what is now described,
> Then talked of, told about, a tinge the less
> In every fresh transmission. ([XII,] 13-16)"

(*Browning's Roman Murder Story*, 317-318).

[60] Ward, *Robert Browning and His World*, I, 183.

[61] "Pope Innocent, called upon to pronounce sentence upon another is himself under sentence. He is an old man confronting death and facing a final symbolic act, a microcosm of his past and future. Judging Guido forces him to examine the possible basis for moral action and serves as his personal Armageddon. His judgment is rendered before he speaks, and what he says in only incidentally concerned with judgment. The action of the book occurs within him. His speech is an internal dialogue, an argument with himself . . ." (King, *The Focusing Artifice*, 152).

[62] Raymond, *The Infinite Moment*, 231.

[63] King, *The Focusing Artifice*, xx.

[64] Stevens, "A Primitive Like an Orb," *Poems*, 142.

## Conclusion

[1] *Browning's Essay on Shelley*, 63. Also see page 14, above.

[2] Ibid., 65.

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## Abbreviations

Bull.JRL: *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*

JEGP: *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*

MLN: *Modern Language Notes*

PQ: *Philological Quarterly*

RES: *Review of English Studies*

SEL: *Studies in English Literature*

SP: *Studies in Philology*

TSL: *Tennessee Studies in Literature*

UTQ: *University of Toronto Quarterly*

VN: *Victorian Newsletter*

VP: *Victorian Poetry*

VS: *Victorian Studies*

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